

Interview with Stephen T. Johnson

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

STEPHEN T. JOHNSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This interview has not been edited by Mr. Johnson]

Q: Steve, I will start this off by asking, can you tell me when and where you were born and something about your parents?

JOHNSON: I was born on December 18, 1936 in Tokyo, Japan. My father was a Foreign Service officer. The reason it was Japan was that his first assignment was in, I guess, 1935, for two years of language study in Tokyo.

Q: We will probably go through a bit of your father's Foreign Service career as it affects you. Your mother was obviously in Japan, too. What was her background?

JOHNSON: My mother was a "Tillman." My middle name was Tillman. She was raised mainly in the Washington area. Her mother died when she was very young, so she kind of kicked around among relatives. She and my father met because they were living in the same boarding house here in Washington. My father graduated from college, and he came to Washington to study at Georgetown School of Foreign Service. He also worked doing typing and also at an auto repair establishment here in the District in order to make money to live. It was of course the time of the Depression.

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Q: Oh, yes.

JOHNSON: They got married in 1932. So it was a relatively whirlwind romance since Dad had graduated from college in 1931. My elder sister, Judith, was born here in Washington in January of 1934.

Q: Could you talk about where you lived during some of your father's assignment processes as you were growing up?

JOHNSON: My first move was on my first birthday. My Dad was assigned to the Vice Counsel in what was then called Japan. It is now called Seoul, Korea. In those days it was a two-man post. So we lived in Korea. My brother, William, was born there in 1938. Of course, my personal memories of this are non-existent.

Q: I realize this.

JOHNSON: Sometime along in there, the Japanese in 1938 were invading China. Dad was sent TDY in Tientsin and was away a long while because they needed someone in Tientsin who spoke Japanese. This happened to coincide with a great flood in Tientsin so he had kind of a hard time of it. But the next assignment was to what was then Mukden in Manchukuo [now Manchuria]. We, of course, didn't recognize Manchukuo, so the family - then three children and my parents - moved up to Mukden. Now it is Chien-ying, I believe. I think again a two or three-man post.

The big excitement for my father was the semi-war that was going on between the Japanese and the Soviets.

Q: Oh, yes.

JOHNSON: I think [during] one of his assignments, they were trying to get some feel for what was going on in casualties. Very difficult to do according to his account. Some

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of it consisted of standing at railroad stations at 3:00 in the morning when it was very cold. Then in December of 1940, the family was evacuated. The Department of State had decided, I guess, that war was coming and we came back to the States to California, where my parental grandparent lived. Dad stayed in Mukden.

Q: Where did you go to school in California?

JOHNSON: I started school in California. At that time we rented a place in Laguna Beach. I went to kindergarten in Laguna Beach, California.

Q: It was very artsy-crafty in those days.

JOHNSON: It was. I have a nice portrait that was painted of my mother at that time. We lived right on the beach in a place which I think would cost thousands and thousands of dollars today. We were there and my cousins were there as well. My uncle, Gerald Warner, was also a Foreign Service officer. He had married my father's sister, Retta, and she and her children were similarly evacuated and lived in the area.

Both our fathers came back in the middle of 1942. They were put on the along with other diplomats from the Far East and arrived back in the States. Dad was assigned to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He said this was because the Far East Bureau was basically trying to hide some of its officers from the European Bureau. It didn't have assignments for all of them. So he was sent down to Rio, ostensibly to keep an eye on the Japanese minority down there which apparently behaved circumspectly during the whole war. In fact, he was assigned to the economic section of the embassy and enjoyed it very much. But he lamented it at the time [as] kind of a bad assignment. His peers who went off to China, and other exciting places, a lot of them had their careers very badly harmed because of McCarthyism and the loss of China while he was quietly waging economic warfare in Rio.

Q: I think this is one of the things that as I do these interviews, how for the most part the Foreign Service up through almost the end of the war was relegated to economic warfare

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in Latin America which was really a pretty minor field of action. But I mean, were sort of shunted to one side. How long were you in Laguna?

JOHNSON: Well, it is kind of hard to figure. I guess we must have been there about a year and a half.

Q: And then on to where?

JOHNSON: And then on to Rio. We went down to Rio, and I went to school in Rio. There was an American school near our house. My younger sister, Jennifer, was born in Rio in 1943. I guess it was 1944 then, so it was a relatively short assignment. We came back to the States because Dad went to the military government school at Chicago, which had been set up with the idea of establishing a military government in Japan. I guess in a similar way that we eventually did in Germany. He was both kind of a student and an instructor as I understand it.

We then went to live with my paternal grandmother in Glendale, California, and I went to school there. Columbus School still exists, I believe. Dad, after a short time in Chicago, went out to the Far East where he was a Foreign Service officer, as I understand it, kind of on the staff of General MacArthur. One of the first things he did was to go to Manila when they liberated that. He had the job of sorting out the civilians, citizens and non-citizens, that were released from camps and things and helping the citizens and doing other consular things. He was a consul.

Then when the war ended, he was sent to Yokohama and reestablished the consulate that existed there before the war. He was at the time an FSO-6 or something, or "8." He arrived there just at the surrender with lots of excitement you know, of that particular time. After he arrived, he was sent around the country in an airplane, obviously an air force airplane, to try to sort out prisoners who were released from various camps in Japan - both military

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and civilian prisoners. He said that he got to Hiroshima in time to greet the Marines when they landed there, and he had a very great adventurous time.

Then was sent over to Korea for a little while because Korea was real afterthought at the end of the war.

Q: Oh, absolutely.

JOHNSON: No one had considered it at all. He had actually served there as a vice consul. So he went over there and did some small assistance to the general who was in charge of setting up our establishment in Korea. Then he came back to Yokohama and set up the consulate. In June of 1946, we - the rest of the family - sailed over in the General McMegs, which was a converted troop carrier, I guess. It was then under the President Lines, but very much in the troop carrier mode. My brother and I, nine and seven years old, I guess, were basically in a cabin with 14 men. I guess it was an officers' cabin in the troop situation. My mother and two sisters were in a similar establishment for ladies, and the missionaries were down in the hold where the troops would be. We were going first class.

Anyway we arrived in Yokohama. The head consul had an apartment in the building, which included offices and four apartments, and we lived there.

Q: You were there from when to when?

JOHNSON: Dad was there from 1945. We were there from June of 1946 to, I guess, June of 1949.

Q: He was in Japan?

JOHNSON: Well, Yokohama, when we got there in June of 1946, I was nine years old. The striking thing of course was that the city was destroyed. Block after block of bare cement with chimneys, and a lot of them had great safes that had survived somehow or

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another. By that time, the rubble had been pretty much cleared up. The consulate notably was spared along with several other of the Western style buildings along the boon, the new Grand Hotel and several other buildings. On the other hand, the housing on what we called the "bluff," the kind of hilly part of Yokohama, had survived pretty well.

Japanese men were going around mostly in their army uniforms because they didn't have any other clothes. They obviously didn't have insignia any more. Women wore the kind of baggy pants outfits that the Japanese government had prescribed for them during the war. It was very poor. It seemed to me that the principal manufacturing element in those days was beer cans, which the army discarded and which were beaten into toys or implements or anything. For a small boy, it was interesting and fun.

We went to a Catholic school at first-St. Joseph's College. I don't think I had ever really focused on the fact that it were something other than a church that it was divided into categories such as Catholic and Protestants and the like. But it was my first encounter with Catholics, and I discovered that they believed in lots of homework-which was a bit of a shock. Then after a few months, an army school was formed in Yokohama under the Calvert System. I remember there were two classes at least for the grammar school one for one to four, and I was in the fourth grade, then from five to eight, and then there were a few high school students. One of the things that was notable was that about the only vehicles around ran on coal and steam, other than of course our army.

Q: It was sort of a charcoal, wasn't it?

JOHNSON: Charcoal. When we went down to the railroad station in the morning all the big black taxi cabs would be stoking up. There would be these billows of smoke and everything. They had a similar type of thing, although different in Brazil when we were there because of lack of gasoline. But slowly, even during the three years we were there I remember seeing the first bicycle that was made by Mitsubishi. I think the idea that

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Japanese would build cars was something that would have shocked us small boys at the time.

The army took over the park that was across the street between the consulate and the bay and built a housing area there for field grade officers, majors and lieutenant colonels, and so there was kind of a neighborhood of American children where we did the normal things that people in neighborhoods do. We played football and formed gangs and all that sort of thing.

The American population grew pretty rapidly while we were there. After the first year, a larger school was established, no longer on the bluff. Then the third year the school grew yet again; in fact there were two grammar schools by that time. One in what was called area "X." I assume after it must have gotten a better name after a while. The one we went to at Misagua Beach. We enjoyed ourselves a lot.

My brother and I we were in the Cub Scouts. Once the Cub Scouts had an outing to what was basically an arms dump of Japanese weapons, tanks, machine gun mortars, whatever you name it, and basically we Cub Scouts could take away whatever we could carry. The stuff was rusted, but Bill and I had brought back to the backyard of the consulate, a heavy machine gun (none of these was operative - wisely so!). We also got a mortar, our light machine gun, I don't know, a few helmets and other kinds of things, so we were in hog heaven as far as that. We had a carpenter at the consulate who would make the wooden parts which had sometimes rotted on these weapons. So we enjoyed that. The consulate had a big back garden that we played in.

Q: You left there in 1949 so you would be how old then?

JOHNSON: Well, twelve, I guess.

Q: So high school time.

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JOHNSON: Junior high school.

Q: Where did you go then?

JOHNSON: Dad was assigned back to Washington to the Far East Bureau. We moved into a house at Rosemont Avenue right on the eastern side of Rock Creek Park near the zoo, and I was sent to what was then Central Junior Senior High School. It is now Cardoza. So I went there for a year. My elder sister was there, my brother was in grammar school, and my little sister was starting out in school.

This was a time of turmoil in the schools in Washington because in 1949 the white population of Washington was shrinking. It had been decided that Central High School, which was apparently the oldest school in Washington, would be turned into a black high school, Cardoza. This of course sat ill with the alumni and other students of Central. So there was a great deal of controversy during that year. I had a good time, and going to school it didn't bother me particularly. But it did mean that in our second year, Central was no longer our school. It had become...

Q: This was the time we were still talking about segregation.

JOHNSON: It was still the time of segregation. We went off to McFarland Junior High School, which is attached to Theodore Roosevelt High School in the far part of the city. It meant a longer bus ride, but we went off there. We then progressed through high school in the normal way, and then while this was going on, the Korean War intervened.

Q: 1950, June.

JOHNSON: I forget Dad's position at the beginning of the war. Various during the period we were here, he was the deputy director of North East Asian Affairs and then the director. Then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Far East. In any case, he was very heavily involved in the Korean War stuff and had to do a lot of work and run around.

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But after the war ended, he was posted as ambassador to Czechoslovakia. We left in December of 1953 and took the ship the S.S. America across the Atlantic in December of 1953. We landed in La Havre and off loaded our 1949 Ford Station Wagon and set off across the continent to Prague. This was my father's first visit to Europe, as a matter of fact. He said that the only way to go was as an ambassador.

But anyway, we drove across a very wintery... You could still see a lot of the effects from the War in Europe, particularly when we got to Germany. We crossed the "Iron Curtain" at Vidhouse on the German side on Christmas Eve of 1953.

For a teenager, and I think even for an ambassador, the Iron Curtain really kind of lived up to its reputation. It was a place [that was] obviously very fortified. It took us about an hour or so to get through the formalities at the border even though we were the only people crossing. There was basically a dead zone for five kilometers after you crossed the border. It had a kind of fearsome [feel]. It was December and bleak, but in any case, we persisted and arrived at the embassy. I think somebody must have come and guided us because this we obviously went right to the residence, which was one of the grand houses of the Foreign Service.

Q: Oh, yes, a palace.

JOHNSON: It was built in the 1930s by the Pepceck family who now live on Long Island, for about three million dollars. This is when three million dollars was a very considerable sum, and it was a magnificent house. There was a [reception] there and the whole embassy turned out. It was really a nice homecoming, and we found that it was very easy to shift from living in a small row house in Washington to this palace.

Q: You all were in Czechoslovakia from when to when? Were you ischool there?

JOHNSON: No. My parents were there from December of 1953 to March of 1958-which was a long time for that kind of assignment principally because my Dad got involved in

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the talks in Geneva with Indochina and other things I don't know. I guess the Department found it kind of easy to just leave him there. He commuted a lot. Being ambassador to Czechoslovakia wasn't very onerous because our relations were pretty minimal. There were various crisis and things, but the embassy was quite small - I think 12 people at the time. There were no Marine guards.

My brother and I were sent off, almost immediately, to the Army or the Defense Department school at Heidelberg, Germany, which had a dormitory. So we arrived there after Christmas vacation of 1953-54 and established ourselves with other students in the dormitory. It was a normal American high school, and we returned to Prague on vacations. There was always kind of an adventure getting back to Prague because getting your visa was difficult; and it wasn't that they refused visas, but it was just the paperwork took some time.

Q: Well, the Czechs were one of the most hard nosed on the administrative side.

JOHNSON: They were. I know the local employees sometimes would just disappear from the embassy. They would be arrested, and there would be no explanation at all. It was a grim kind of time in Czechoslovakia, and my brother and I didn't spend that much time [there]. We were in school and went back on vacation. We obviously took some trips with our parents to other places in Europe.

When the next school year came up, the school year 1954-55 which was my senior in high school. The dormitory in Heidelberg had been closed during weekends. It was just a weekday dorm. But an army family in Heidelberg happily invited me to stay at their place on the weekends. So I continued at Heidelberg while my brother went to Frankfurt High School - again a Defense Department high school - because they had a seven day dorm there. That kind of split us up at the time. So we progressed through high school.

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Then after graduation in 1955, I went to the University of Virginia as a freshman. The school year 1955-56.

Q: So you were at the University of Virginia from 1955 to what?

JOHNSON: 1956. In the meantime I had [also] applied for an appointment to West Point. So I went back to Prague for summer vacation of 1956 but then reported to West Point (I guess it was something like the end of June or beginning of July of 1956) to start the summer training that cadets have. I did one year as a plebe at West Point, but I flunked Russian. I hadn't asked for Russian, but you had to put your choice of five languages in order, and I chose French (I studied that a little bit in high school), then Spanish. Then Russian was kind of a throwaway and then Portuguese. I guess German must have been my last.

However, you ordered the languages, if you were stupid enough to put Russian any higher than fourth, you got it. So I got Russian, and at the end of the year had flunked it. At West Point at that time you had to pass all your subjects or you were turned back and, since I had already been a freshman two years by that time, I decided it was time to move on. I applied to Occidental College in Los Angeles, which is my father's alma mater.

Since my academic record had been a little bit checkered by that time, I think there was a bit of a quid pro quo because it happened that at the same time I was applying, the person who was supposed to be giving the commencement address at Occidental that June had some sort of accident or his wife had some sort of accident and all of a sudden they didn't have a commencement speaker. So it was kind of simultaneous that they asked my father to give the commencement address with only a few days notice, and he asked them to take me as a student.

Anyway, I was a student at Occidental College where I spent three years and graduated in 1960.

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In the middle of that my parents, I guess in 1958, were transferred to Bangkok. So I went Bangkok one summer when he was there. The other summer I worked for the same "Call Carl" auto repair place that my father had worked for sometime before as a summer job.

Q: Well now, while you were at Occidental, were you ever looking at that point at the Foreign Service as a career particularly having done the West Point thing and sort of moved over to something else.

JOHNSON: I was. In fact, my father had said if you want to pass the exam take economics. And I did. There was quite an interest at Occidental in the Foreign Service. If my memory serves, [out of a class of about 400], about-20 some students took the Foreign Service exam. Five of us ended up passing the orals and entering from my class. Lars Hyde, who was in Saigon, you may remember, was my classmate. Dave Aaron, who didn't stay in the Foreign Service that long, but later on was the deputy national security advisor and is now OECD ambassador in Paris. Bob Runitz, who was my debate partner in college, went to Japan. He spent some years there and has since left the Foreign Service relatively early on and has been involved in consulting and other things on Japan for a long time in New York. There was Jim Taylor, who was in for awhile and then somehow or other transferred to the CIA and, I think, was controller and worried about their money, which must have been interesting.

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: So there was quite an interest in the Foreign Service at Occidental. There was a major in diplomacy and world affairs, which I didn't take. I was an economics major. We were all, of course, facing the draft in those days as well, which sort of complicated matters.

Q: *Oh, yes. You took the written exam in 1960, was it?*

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JOHNSON: 1959.

Q: And then you took the oral.

JOHNSON: I took the oral.

Q: I always like to catch the impressions of people who have taken the orals at a different times. Can you remember any of the questions?

JOHNSON: Well, it was the old kind of "free form" kind of oral. They ask questions. They obviously ask questions about things that you should know about if you studied a paper about this or that. I had been the manager of the track team at Occidental, which was quite a fine track team at the time, and they asked me about particulars in track. They asked me where the source of the Missouri River was, which was a traditional question which happily I was prepared for.

Q: Where is the source of the Missouri?

JOHNSON: It is the confluence of Jefferson, Gallatin, and Madison rivers in 3 Forks, Montana. If you said it is West Virginia, you were in trouble. And kind of American cultural things. It was very free form. The people who did it looked like what I guessed Foreign Service officers looked like. Of course I knew what a Foreign Service officer looked like. I had seen quite a number of them.

The test took place in the subway terminal building in downtown Los Angeles. The first problem I had that was the number of the room I was supposed to go to I couldn't find in the hall. It was an inter-room, and I was kind of wandering around in the hall. One of the testers came out and summoned me in. I did my stuff.

Q: Well, did you go in, in 1960?

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JOHNSON: I graduated in June of 1960, and I was facing military service. I joined the Reserves, and so in July of 1960, I was at Basic Training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. I did my military service, and I was discharged. You could do six months, and then you were in the Reserves.

Q: We weren't in a war at that time.

JOHNSON: No. We weren't in a war. I remember one of the things when we went through it all just seemed like the Boy Scouts. The idea that you would actually shoot these guns at anybody or this was serious didn't occur to anybody. But so I did Fort Knox and then Fort Belvoir and was sent to the active reserve just before Christmas in 1960. They obviously wanted to get rid of us before Christmas. I mean, we were a pretty useless group. So it was really five months or something that we did rather than the full six months. So I was out just before Christmas.

I think it was the 26th of January, just after the Kennedy inauguration in the meantime I had gotten the letters and everything that I joined the Foreign Service, and I reported in.

Q: Could you sort of describe the A-100 course you were in, which is the basic officer's course? This is the start of the Kennedy administration and with sort of the juices flowing within this group as far as public service and all that?

JOHNSON: I think so. There were thirty of us. We were the 42nd class. I have never understood the numbering of them.

Q: I can tell you I was in class 1. There had been numbers before but of that group, I was class 1, which started July 5, 1955. There had been classes before but during the McCarthy period there had been a big gap and people came in sort of one at a time and were sort of thrown into the breach. So we were a new phenomenon sort of the Foreign Service was getting back into the business again.

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JOHNSON: Yes, I think they hadn't given the exam in 1958 in my time [due to] budgetary reasons or something or other. Then there was a large turnout in 1959 when I took it. My class was entirely State Department. There wasn't any USIA. There were 30 of us, 29 men and one woman. If memory serves, the average age was about 27 or so. So I was a little bit younger at 24. I would say the great majority of the men had done some sort of military service. Some of it had been several years as officers and the like. People from all around.

The coordinator of the class was Sandy Peaslee, who was a Chinese language officer. He was quite a nice man. We were in the basement of Arlington Towers studying there. At first we did little trips. I remember we went to Commerce and got lectured by a man at Commerce, who had the ability to kind of put us all to sleep.

Q: It must have been the same man who put me to sleep 10 yearbefore.

JOHNSON: It was hard. We had one fellow -I guess there is probably one assigned to each class - that when you had five or 10 minutes between classes, and you had about six things you wanted to do, and the lecturer asked rhetorically whether there were any questions, would ask a question. Something like, the "Have you stopped beating your wife" variety, which would require an extensive answer. But the class we got along pretty well.

I remember, when we had our little career chats, the career guidance people recommended to the one lady that she pick out one of the other officers in the class and marry him because that was... They named the particular one who happened to be the fellow, I guess, that had seen that counselor just before her. She didn't marry him. In the end, she married somebody else who was not in the Foreign Service.

But we went through. We had a trip to New York and spent several days [there] getting wine and dined by investment banks and things; we enjoyed that very much. We stayed at Governor's Island very inexpensively.

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Q: I stayed at Seaman's Rest.

JOHNSON: You are right. We went out to Governor's Island, but we were staying at Seaman's Rest as well. That was a different trip that I went to Governor's Island. It was down in the Bowery kind of area. Yes, you are right.

Q: I don't think you'd do that today. You'd lose too many of your class probably.

JOHNSON: There weren't any minorities in the class. We had one fellow who in today's terms would be described as a Hispanic, but that was about it. When we got our assignments, I was assigned to the Department. Almost all classes have this deal where you pitch in money, a dollar, and whoever gets the worst assignment gets all the money. In our case it was a fellow assigned to Georgetown, Guyana, which, as I understand, still often takes the bell.

But I had the problem that I was on language probation, as were lots of my classmates, so the first thing that happened, to a bunch of us at least, [was that] we started studying language - in my case, French - in the same basement cubbyholes that we had been in before. We did four months of French. But four months of French wasn't enough to get us to 3.0 [proficiency]. They were very tough in the French department. In any case, I got 2+ and went to my first job in the Department, in the European Bureau in the office of Western European Affairs as an information specialist.

In those days, the European Bureau had public affairs officers in each office of the bureau. In other words in the Western European office, there was a public affairs person. In fact, there were two. I was number 2. In addition, there was a Bureau public affairs person. This was really a large establishment, and it was almost immediately cut back after I arrived.

In fact, my first boss, a woman who was a civil servant, had her job abolished within a few weeks after I arrived. There were other discombobulations, and my job was basically eliminated as well, as they went to something roughly like the system that has prevailed

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ever since of having a small public affairs office for the Bureau. So I was there for a few months doing odd jobs around the European Bureau.

One good thing was that August of 1961 of course, was the Berlin Wall crisis. In September 1961, apparently the Defense Department decided to send a group of American reporters to Europe to see what the Defense Department was doing in the way of preparing for meeting this crisis. Somehow or other, somebody decided that there should be somebody from the State Department along on this, and since I was perhaps the least useful person in the Western European Office, I got the job and went off.

It was a grand, grand thing, where the Defense Department worried about whether everybody's bags were in the hall and all those kinds of things. We went with this group of reporters to London and saw people like the Defense Minister. We went to Paris, similarly at high level, Bonn, Berlin. We looked through gun slits across the Iron Curtain. We did all these exciting things, and it took several weeks.

Q: Of course it is hard to recreate, but at the time of the Berlin Wall, there was considerable concern in the United States, including President Kennedy was calling up the Reserves and I mean, we were for a while we really were looking at a possibility of a war. It didn't seem too far off. It is often overlooked. One thinks of the missile crisis of the next year. But this was another crisis.

JOHNSON: Yes, people were called up, and people in the Foreign Service were called up. Happily for me, my unit, which was the 352nd Civil Affairs Headquarters Area A that met at Georgetown, was not called up. But there were other people - FSOs - who got called up and spent eight or nine months sitting around Andrews Air Force Base or something.

When we got to Europe, certainly when we got to Berlin, it was very tense along the way. I think that personally, since I was just levered into all of this, I wasn't as worried as I should have been.

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Q: Then you came back after this and what were you up to?

JOHNSON: Then I was assigned to the Board of Examiners of the Foreign Service as a flunky. It was, I guess, Bob Pelletreau, who is now the Assistant Secretary for the Near East and I had the job of putting together the files of the candidates and preparing them for people who were taking the oral exam. They took an oral exam in Washington, and so we did that for several months. We had a really good looking secretary, so we met lots of other junior officers who would casually drop by our office.

So I did that for a few months until I was assigned to the Operations Center, where I served for about 18 months as a junior watch officer. This was kind of the beginnings of the Operations Center. It wasn't "the" beginning - that had been earlier in 1961 - but it was kind of trying to get organized, and there were always kind of [questions regarding] what you were supposed to do and what hours should be.

Q: Actually, there had been an embryonic operations center about that time, but the missile crisis really of 1962 really spurred them on.

JOHNSON: I had been there for some time before the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis took place. They apparently, before I got there - and I'm not too sure of the timing of all this - you used to come on [duty] and basically there were bunks and you slept, and then were there to leap out of bed and do things if a crisis intervened. When I was there we didn't do that. We had the three shifts, and we were up all the time. We didn't have so many little things we had to do, as apparently you do now. When things were slow, we read novels. We [also] did do a watch officer report every day.

One of things you did was there was a top secret summary that was put out during the night. Normally there was a senior watch officer, a junior watch officer, a writer, and sometimes an editor. The writer and editor had the job of culling all the telegrams that came through and doing up a very short summary (with the telegrams attached) that went

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to the Secretary and various other senior people. This was always a big job. The senior watch officer was responsible for it and kept an eye on it, and that kind of kept you going. Given the kind of typing and reproducing skills of those days, just typos and things were a big problem.

Q: You were saying that you had to worry about typos and all that.

JOHNSON: Well, just the kind of mechanical process of getting things done was always a problem. Another [document] that the Ops Center did weekly I guess it was called Current Foreign Affairs. It was a weekly kind of magazine that was sent out to the field by [the diplomatic] pouch. We had to collect things from all the bureaus, and then we edited it and put together. I forget what it was called.

Q: Yes. It was something of that nature. Sort of a news magazine.

JOHNSON: We also put out a thing which, I guess, was an expurgated version of the Top Secret summary, kind of a summary for ambassadors. That was a daily thing. So we did those things. We handled the crises that came along. The first one when I was there, I remember, [had to do with] a convoy going into Berlin; there was the great question as to whether it would be stopped. We would get reports every few minutes on its progress, and it wasn't stopped [in the end].

When you picked up the phone, and I'm sure it is the same, it could be anything. It could be some charg# telling you about a coup. Or a drunken sailor from Oregon asking what the capital of Switzerland was because they had a bet going on. Or you name it. So you had to be kind of flexible there. The Cuban missile crisis in October of 1962, as you suggest, was very important. [I was] more concerned that we might not see the dawn sometimes. The Ops Center was very involved. In my particular job, we did extra shifts at the time. The normal thing about the Operations Center was [that] no matter what the crisis, you went home. You know, your regular schedule.

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But during the Cuban missile crisis we had to do extra. There was a big map and I had to plot Soviet ships as they were approaching Cuba. We got our data from our Navy about where our Navy ships were. You could see them kind of coming, and then they stopped.

Q: Because this was the crux of the whole thing. Would they go? Would we fire? And would World War III start?

JOHNSON: Yes. They stopped. We didn't have World War III. Of course, FBIS [Foreign Broadcast Information Service] was very important as I think it always has been. It is now getting neglected. That was the way that we and the Soviets were communicating because through our public statements which the FBIS would get and translate. So we were rushing those to the front desk and the Secretary and other people all the time when they came in.

Q: Well, did you find principals in the State Department were coming down and hang around to find out what was happening?

JOHNSON: We would get some. Not too much. Sometimes we would get them [all] in there, the Secretary, Mr. Ball, and my father. They themselves would get kind of exhausted. There was kind of a sleeping on the couch in Ball's office. After the Cuban missile crisis, we put in kind of a motel room in the back of the Operations Center so somebody could come in and actually get a night's sleep if they had to stay in the Department. I don't think that exists anymore. But it was a very tense time and the real crisis didn't last that long. That was October, 1962. We went on to other crises and things in the Op Center after that. It was always kind of "one damn thing after another" as they say about history. The Ops Center was a strain physically. I was there for 18 months. There was no painless way to [adjust]. You kind of changed your shift every two days and then you had your "weekend" Wednesday and Thursday and there wasn't anybody around to interact with. Then when everybody else went off to the beach, you were on duty. Sometimes you would jump out of bed and get all dressed and rush in and discover that, you know, you had twisted around your time and it was actually your day off.

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In the meantime, I was [still] taking French in an early morning class. So sometimes I would get off duty at 1:00 and rush home and get to sleep and then get up in order to get to French class at 7:30 and then have to rush back. I managed to get off my language probation though, not so much because I learned that much French but because I played volleyball with the French instructors. I think they decided, well, Johnson will never master the language, but he is a pretty decent volleyball player.

But I was there doing that until, I guess, September of 1963. I wathen transferred to the consulate at Montreal.

Q: So you were in Montreal from when to when?

JOHNSON: Well, I guess I arrived there in September, it might havbeen a little earlier to 1965 - two years.

Q: What was the status of Quebec Province during that period of time?

JOHNSON: Well, it was bubbling. Separatism was becoming respectable. Though it certainly had an unrespectable side. There had been bombs put in trash cans and at least one fellow was killed.

Q: A minister or something.

JOHNSON: That was later on. This was an unfortunate watchman who stepped into the alley at the wrong time. There was great ferment. Montreal was a really nice place to live. The consulate was up on the side of a mountain and was in two old houses and was quite nice. This was 1963-65. The Vietnam War was kind of percolating along, but the student, well, the students and things were not agitating about it as far as the United States was concerned even in Canada at the time - beginning to.

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But the University of Montreal had lots of ferment about separatism. I think separatism was kind of centered more in Montreal than Quebec City. My impression was that the French Canadians in Quebec City, which was like 95% French Canadian, were rather secure, while the ones in Montreal, where the English-speaking population was much larger and economically dominant, were not so secure. You did have quite a bit of ferment.

At the time, Rene La Veque was a minister in the liberal government of Jean Lesage in Quebec, and we could see that Rene La Veque was moving towards separatism. When he became a separatist, then separatism would really become a serious proposition. In due course, that happened. We could see that going on, and the consulate had a job in reporting on it. We found not that much interest back in Washington in all this. I think Washington basically goes from crisis to crisis. The fact that you might be a crisis 10 or 15 years down the road, I guess, understandably, doesn't excite anybody too much.

The consulate had a little bit of tricky relationship with the embassy in Ottawa. It obviously saw itself as the premier reporting post in Canada, as it should be. Most of our reports were Airgrams and the like. The telegram was a wonderful and exciting thing. We had no machines or anything like that for encoding and decoding, so we had to do it by the old one-time pad. We had a lady whose job it was to do the coding and decoding, and I learned how to do it myself. Of course, a three or four paragraph telegram would come in, and it would take you all morning to sort it out. So we didn't do much of that sort of thing.

In fact the consulate got bombed one night. I guess, it seems to me this was May, and I really forget if it was 1964 or 1965, somebody put a bomb under kind of a bridge between the two houses that made up the consulate.

Sometime about midnight or one o'clock the thing went off. There was nobody in the consulate. I guess the little man who cleaned up after hours might have still been there. But anyway it blew in about 80 windows. It didn't harm anybody. We called the Operations Center and said we had been bombed. But the consul general was reluctant to send a

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telegram because of how difficult it was to do so. We were all home. I guess somebody must have called the consul general or something, and he called me and there were several junior officers [who] kind of trooped down there. The police were crunching around in the broken glass. The CG [consul general] gave me the job of staying there all night because there was no longer any security with all these. I kind of sat in the consulate with this wind blowing in and out, listening to the police crunching around outside. There wasn't much else to do. I kind of looked around and found a paperback novel about the kind of high life of the diplomatic circles. I forget the name of the thing. So I read that while I was in this kind of desolate consulate.

The bombing was kind of strange. This was before terrorism and bombing. The consulate had no fence around it or anything like that.

The separatists who were the principal bombers, one might say, had no real argument with the United States. In fact, one of the things that I like about French Canada was in those days at least, when in the rest of the world things did not work out right they blamed the United States, in French Canada they blamed the English Canadians. When you met, separatists and the like, were always very friendly and interested in convincing you of their argument.

[In those days,] the Quebec FLQ was kind of the semi-terrorist organization. When they did do bombings, they normally announced it and why they did it. No one ever did [time] for this. My theory was that it was Jurassic separatists from Switzerland who had mistaken us for the Swiss consulate next door and then were too embarrassed to say anything. But no one else bought that. I don't know if anybody ever found out about it.

The principal work of the consulate was visas, and that was my principal work as well. The junior officers rotated around the consulate. In the summer, there was a tremendous amount of NIVs. We concentrated on that and did about 80 immigrant visas a day. In those days, under the peculiarities of our law, people who came from Cuba and other Caribbean

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Islands, particularly all those Cuban refugees, had to leave the United States in order to get an immigrant visa. They couldn't just change their status in the States. So typically, every day we would do about 25 out of our 80 IVs would be what we called U.S. cases.

Those were for the most part bleary eyed Cubans who had done all their paperwork and would have to get on the bus in New York City and ride up to Montreal, arriving about 5:30 in the morning. They stood around on the icy streets for several hours, came to the consulate at the opening of business, and did the formalities, then got their visas and went back to the States - I guess before lunch, if things worked out well for them. You had to learn a little Spanish as it turned out.

The balance of the cases was mainly Canadians. The NIV load was non-Canadians because Canadians didn't need visas to go to the United States. So it was kind of like a mini-United Nations of people coming in, most of whom were what Canadians called "landed immigrants." These would be our resident aliens - Greeks, Italians...

Q: Was there the feeling that people were becoming landed immigrants in Canada but using this to move into the United States for warmer climes?

JOHNSON: There were a few. No. This was the NIV visitor's visa thing. I don't think that too many of the people, these landed immigrants, that we gave visitors visas to stayed. I am sure some of them did. One of the peculiarities of Quebec was that if you wanted to go to the beach, for instance, the nearest place was Lake Champlain, New York. It wasn't like if you were doing a visa to someplace in Ethiopia. You know, this was going to be a really tremendous deal; the guy wanted to go to the beach. It was perfectly reasonable. And if he was a landed immigrant, and he had been there for a year or some time and had a job, you gave him the visa.

One of the other things was that the Quebec fathers had decided that the drive-in movies were dens of sin. I guess there was some justice in that view. So they had none in the province of Quebec. If you were a hot blooded landed immigrant in Canada - in Quebec

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- and you wanted to go to a drive-in movie with your girlfriend, you had to go down to Plattsburgh, New York. There was some question as to whether that was "212-A-13," going to the United States principally to perform an immoral sexual act. But we said, "No, they were principally going to see the movie." But one of the thing you learned not to do was hit the border when the drive-in let out down at Highgate Springs. So you had a lot of the visa flow and some colorful people.

One of my additional jobs was kind of being the bouncer at the consulate general. We didn't have any guards or Marines or that kind of thing. Most people were well behaved, but when there was a necessity to actually take somebody by the scruff of the neck and pitch him out, it fell to me. But it was a nice consulate.

Q: I'd like to catch the flavor of the times. Here is Montreal, which is the commercial and cultural center, but during the 1960s when you were there, the French Francophones and the Anglophones were having problems.

JOHNSON: They were having real problems.

Q: What was the fit of the consulate then? Did you find that you were absorbed into the Anglo-phone community or were there efforts to bridge the gap? How did it work?

JOHNSON: The consulate was not actively trying to influence the evolution of events. We were obviously observing them. When I got there the consul general was Jerome T. Gaspard, who had been there about six years and then was transferred to Quebec. So he really knew Quebec Province. The later part of my time there, the CG was Richard Hawkins. We tried as much as possible to be in both communities. The commercial side of things was heavily Anglophone. You are correct, the Canadians had been a very kind of repressed right-wing - I'm probably not doing this justice - but kind of clergy-run society for a long time. There had almost been a dictator in Maurice Du Placie, who had been the leader of Quebec for a long time. He had died just a few years before I got there.

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So the French Canadians were sort of bursting out of the confines of this closed, inward-looking society. In looking for economic power, looking for political power, they kind of already had political power but more freedom and great effervescence in their universities and their schools.

There was evolution taking place in the economy of the country. There was lots of embracing of left-wing ideas, which would have been anathema before. Obviously, this was causing ructions in the church and other places. There were French Canadians who were strong Federalists. What is his name? Trudeau was a professor at the University of Montreal, and he was reviled all the time in the separatist press because he was an eloquent spokesman of federalism. They were obviously important English speaking Qu#b#cois. But everything was in effervescence.

The consulate tried as best it could, given the relative indifference of Washington, to report on all this and keep an eye on it. But we had to watch our step. I know one of my colleagues interviewed or just went down to talk to a fellow who was the head of the Quebec branch of the Social Credit Party, which was a relatively important party in Canada in those days. I think it Saskatchewan. But not so important in Quebec. Basically, he went down to ask him what the program of the party was and things, and the next day the headline in the paper was, "American interference in Quebec political life/internal affairs." You had to be very circumspect.

I might say at the same time, Quebecers - probably for the most part-English Quebecers - were going down to work in the campaign for Bobby Kennedy down in the U.S. Because you could watch CBS and NBC in these places, they really felt so much a part of our culture that they didn't see anything really wrong or any reason why they shouldn't intervene. At the same time, they were fiercely guarding their own independence and their cultural integrity and got very excited when it appeared that we might be intervening in their lives.

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Q: As vice consul, did you get any of this feeling from the leadership level about American cultural dominance and so on? This seems to be a theme that is still very strong, not by the consumers in Canada but by the leadership.

JOHNSON: Well, one of the things about being in Montreal was that the provincial government isn't in Montreal. It is in Quebec City. So we weren't dealing with government officials for the most part. With the mayor -not me - the consul general would do that. Not so much with the French Canadians. The French Canadians were not so worried about American domination of their culture because their culture was quite different than ours. Therefore when I went to places which were separatist and talked to separatists, they were trying to tell us what bad guys the English Canadians were and [pushing] the necessity for an independent Quebec. But the idea that the United States might take them over or was going to absorb them really didn't seem to be uppermost in their mind. I think that it was much more the English Canadian establishment, particularly in Ontario, that worried about that kind of thing. So we didn't have that so much.

Q: *Well, you left there when? 1965?*

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: *Where to?*

JOHNSON: I was assigned to Paris. I might add that my successor, who arrived about a week or so before I left, immediately hanged himself in the - committed suicide in the Sheraton Mt. Royal Hotel.

Q: *Oh, my God! I take it wasn't the assignment.*

JOHNSON: No. It might have been the in box. But he had psychological problems before, but this concerned Mrs. Hawkins, the consul general's wife, so much that she thought I might do it too. So for my last week, after I had moved out of my apartment, I normally

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would have moved into the hotel, I had to live at the consul general's house so she could keep an eye on me. I kept telling her that I had orders to Paris, and the idea of committing suicide didn't come up.

In any case, I guess I had home leave. It happened that my parents were back at this time. I did some traveling with my parents and then got to Paris in late October of 1965. I was assigned to the mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], it was called the United States Regional Office [USRO].

I was a staff assistant to the ambassador, Harlan Cleveland. I was also called secretary of delegation. Each delegation had somebody that was delegated as secretary to be the kind of point of contact for paperwork and stuff.

Q: You were there from when to when?

JOHNSON: I guess I was there from about October of 1965 to about July or so of 1967.

Q: What was that mission doing at that time?

JOHNSON: Soon after I arrived, and I'm not to sure about all the timing of all of this, the basic thing, exciting thing that was happening at NATO was that President de Gaulle was kicking us [NATO] out. There was a large American military establishment in France at the time, basically the zone of communication and supply to our army in Germany. There was the NATO political headquarters. There was the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe [SACEUR] NATO military headquarters in the Paris suburbs. The U.S. European Command [EUCOM], the United States Military headquarters, was also in the kind of suburbs of Paris. President de Gaulle was withdrawing France from the military establishment of NATO and at the same time booting us out. So all the ramifications of that were the principal preoccupation of the mission.

Q: Had de Gaulle made his announcement before you got there?

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JOHNSON: No. That was after.

Q: Was this something that was expected? How did this hit?

JOHNSON: I am not that certain, but I don't think it was unexpected. He had given lots of hints. He had made himself pretty plain. I really forget the process, whether he made some public statement or what he did but it was soon evident. [During] the last meeting to which the French defense minister came, when the other defense ministers were all there, [he] was ostentatiously reading "La Monde" and turning the pages - crackle, crackle, crackle - of his paper while other defense ministers were making their statements.

Q: The French are very good at that kind of thing. They are still doing it. They just did it to Secretary of State Christopher. We are talking late 1996 when the minister of foreign affairs did the equivalent of that.

JOHNSON: Yes. It goes on.

Q: Particularly as the new boy on the block in this thing, one I think is always more sensitive to the emanations from where ever you are going. What were you picking up as far as the attitude of our mission towards the French? Was it sort of spit in your eye or were they mad? Or were they just saying "Oh, that is just the French"? What were you getting?

JOHNSON: I don't think they were mad particularly. It wasn't that unexpected. Obviously they were lots of very practical problems created by what the French did. At the same time, French-American relations at a personal level were never bad. Everybody had lots of French friends and obviously enjoyed living in France. It was this kind of official attitude.

Again, I mean de Gaulle in his heart of hearts, may have been tremendously anti-American, but in a sense, this wasn't an anti-American gesture. It was a gesture about France's place in the world. They were developing their idea about total defense and

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taking responsibility for themselves - just beginning to produce their atomic submarines with the ballistic missiles and the like. But it was a difficult time.

Of course, the people in the mission, on a personal level, were reluctant to leave Paris. There was a long palaver about where the political headquarters should go. Like most things, big diplomatic decisions end up being that you can't go there, you can't go there, you can't go there, so you have to go... Basically, you couldn't go south to Italy because that would be kind of on the flank. You couldn't go to Turkey or Greece. You couldn't obviously go to Portugal. You couldn't really go to Scandinavia. So it became the low countries or England, and they didn't want to move off the continent. So Brussels invited them, and they went to Brussels.

At the same time, there were lots of other NATO issues that were percolating along. My job was basically a paper shuffling type of job as a staff assistant to the ambassador, who was very hard working. I stayed until eight or nine or ten at night in spite of my wishing that he would leave.

Q: Harlan Cleveland. He also had a job in Washington, too.

JOHNSON: Before, he had been assistant secretary in IO. I am not tosure if he did something else in between or whether he just went to...

Q: He was a fairly major figure.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: What was your impression of how he operated?

JOHNSON: As a representative of the United States, it was very favorable. He was a very intelligent, serious man who always impressed me. A lot of the business of NATO is taken care of at weekly luncheons that the ambassadors have. He would come back from those and dictate a 95 paragraph telegram with sub-headings and everything just kind of right

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on through the whole thing. He had a great mastery of what was going on. He wasn't very good at telling jokes I remember at NATO meetings. The British ambassador, as British ambassadors always do, outshone the American ambassador there.

Phil Farley was the DCM who was equally hardworking. His background had been the Atomic Energy Commission. I think later on he was at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency [ACDA]. So the top team was very strong. From the parochial point of view of the staff assistant, the fact that these fellows stayed in the office until all hours of the day and night - I was supposed to stay with them - was a little bit off-putting. Because my job really wasn't that demanding in a sense. You know, checking the papers and the like, but it was long. I'd go to work at eight in the morning and get off at nine-thirty or ten and sometimes have to take the telegrams around to their houses and get the corrections typed in and deliver them to the embassy in downtown Paris at midnight or something. But it was an exciting time.

Q: What was the impression you were getting on the role of the British and the French?

JOHNSON: Well, the British obviously had very close relations with us. I'd say almost invariably we and the British agreed on things. They were a well prepared delegation all the time. They had good people. Some delegations impressed you as being strong in the sense that they knew their dossier; others weren't so strong. But the British, of course, sit next to us at NATO, as they do in most place because of the alphabet. I always thought that may have been... Anyway, the French because of the way things worked out always sat across the way. We were over here sitting right next to each other. You know, it may have affected things over the years. But the British did well. Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh was the ambassador. He died just a few years ago. He was a very able man. We did well with them. The Dutch delegation always struck me as being very strong and well prepared. The Belgian Ambassador D'Stock was the dean, and he certainly knew what he was about. He had always had what he called the D'Stock question. That was when we told the NATO Council about some attitude of ours, D'Stock would always asked whether we were telling

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them or whether we were actually consulting them. Very often when we wanted it to seem like it was the latter, it was in fact the former, given our own torturous way of arriving at decisions. That was always amusing. The NATO Council for the most part worked pretty well together. There was a great crisis going on.

Q: How about the Italians?

JOHNSON: Well, they were more like you would expect the Italian delegation to be. A little bit more free and easy. The Greeks and the Turks glowered at each other. A lot had happened at least in my snail's eye view. The Turkish ambassador seemed a lot more able man than the Greek ambassador. This didn't have as much to do with the attitudes of their countries, they just seemed to be better at it. The Icelandic ambassador never said anything. He wore dark glasses, and I always wanted to know whether he was sleeping or not. But it didn't really matter.

Q: How about the Germans?

JOHNSON: The Germans were quite strong-their delegation there at the time. They were just kind of getting into stretching their wings a little bit at the time. But the ambassadors worked well together. We obviously had contentious meetings and the like. The ministerial meetings, particularly during the crisis with the French were exciting.

Q: What about Norway and Denmark?

JOHNSON: I really don't have much impression of what they were up to. I assume tagging along.

Q: What was the feeling that you were getting of the Soviet threat at that time?

JOHNSON: I certainly didn't have the impression that we, at least in the political headquarters in NATO, really thought that the Soviets were about to rush across the border. Let's see this was 1965-67. The military would tell us about all their divisions and

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things. They were very numerous compared to ours, and they certainly had a lot more stuff on the ground than we did. As to the question of what we would actually be able to do militarily, I mean, there was the "plan," and people would sometimes question if we would be just a road bump as they made their way to the English Channel.

But at least where I was sitting, there wasn't the feeling that this was going to happen any time very soon. It was more an abstract problem. All the time of course - by this time, the Vietnam War was becoming much more something that the public was talking about - we would make reports to the NATO Council about what we were doing there. There would be questions about that, and obviously the public was getting involved in the whole question of Vietnam.

Q: Did you move to Brussels during that time?

JOHNSON: No. I left before it moved to Brussels. They were making the plans and everything. I saw the plan for the present NATO headquarters. That was going to temporary for just a few years. Then there was going to be a permanent building in downtown Brussels. They are still in that provisional building, which has grown because of the greater number of delegations, out by the airport, and any plan for a permanent building in downtown Brussels is long gone.

Q: Well, in 1967 you left.

JOHNSON: Yes. I went back to Washington for training for Vietnam.

Q: Did you volunteer?

JOHNSON: I volunteered. It seemed the most exciting thing going on at the time. I asked not to be assigned to Vietnamese language training. I mean, I volunteered, but I didn't volunteer that much. I didn't want to spend all that much time. So I went back and took what they had, core training, [at that time]. I didn't take the language, but we did do the

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training for CORDS in which we learned about Vietnamese things and the like. Then I was sent out to Vietnam and arrived in early October of 1967.

Q: You were there on this tour from 1967 until when?

JOHNSON: Until I guess it was July of 1970.

Q: In the first place, had you father talked to you about Vietnam at that time?

JOHNSON: A little bit. We hadn't seen very much of each other. He had been in Vietnam and been also back in the Department as deputy under secretary again. Then he had been assigned in 1966 as ambassador to Japan. I hadn't really seen my parents very much for quite some time. We had talked a little bit about it. He was there, and he was wounded in the embassy bombing and stuff. But not that much. I stopped off and saw them in Tokyo on my way out to Vietnam in October of 1967.

When I arrived, I was assigned to the external affairs unit of the political section, which, in those days, was a section of about 25 people under a minister-counselor, Arch Calhoun. It had different parts. The internal-political sub-section had reporting, four or five fellows. Provincial reporting sub-section had nine - I think - two for each of the CORDS areas and one boss. Then there was political-military and, seems to me, there was some other part to it.

But in any case external affairs was three officers, one of whom did the French community in Cambodia, and I was basically the "Communist" guy. I did the North Vietnamese, and the Viet Cong was my job. I relied a lot on the old FBIS.

Q: The FBIS is what?

JOHNSON: Foreign Broadcast Information Service, which put out reams of stuff and also captured documents. The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese were almost as bureaucratic as we are and put out lots of paper. Our folks kept capturing this and there

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was an establishment out by an air base which translated it all. So almost every day I would get a kind of mound of this stuff. A lot of it from my point of view, from the point of view of a military analyst, you know the laundry list of some battalion probably told them volumes, but it wasn't so interesting to me.

But there things that were of interest politically that you would get. You would also get interrogation reports. There was a Joint Interrogation Center where folks would tell their story. I was the only person in the political section who worked on those subjects. You know, kind of did little telegrams and gave advice and otherwise tried to follow things. I wasn't so much involved as some other people in the political section in analyzing South Vietnam, which is what most of the other people were doing. They were following South Vietnamese politics and the kind of political-military situation and corruption and all those other issues which were very controversial and difficult.

I had my own little bailiwick and briefed the press on things when negotiations got started, in Paris. On the whole subject of negotiations and the sort of the pre-negotiation negotiations, it was our little section that provided the support to the ambassador and the deputy ambassador, as the number two person in the embassy, and the minister counselor of political affairs. So we did a lot of paperwork there on writing up suggestions and ideas and doing telegrams.

While the Paris negotiations were going on, and even before, there was kind of a negotiation that took place in Saigon with President Thieu and Vice President Ki and their foreign minister and national security advisor. On our side were Ambassador Bunker and the deputy ambassador and the political counselor and one flunky, often me and sometimes my - well, more often than not - my boss. During that period, my bosses were Roger Kirk and Walt Cutler. Kirk was later ambassador to Romania and some other places. Cutler was ambassador to Saudi Arabia for a while.

Q: And Zaire.

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JOHNSON: And Zaire, you are right. I always thought that Foreign Service officers should learn shorthand, which I didn't. I made some stabs at it.

Q: Was Martin Herz there at the time?

JOHNSON: Martin Herz was there, and he would take shorthand notes sometime, while I would laboriously be writing out longhand. They pretty much wanted a verbatim, so telegrams would get very, very long. Then they would always say don't worry about getting it out as long as we do it before 10:00 this evening, no problem. So you would find yourself bouncing around between Mr. Herz and Mr. Sam Berger, the deputy ambassador, and Ambassador Bunker about various versions of what had been said.

Again, it was the pre-word processing days. So when you came back to bring in your secretary to re-type it for the fifth time, she was getting a little bit testy. But we would do those negotiations.

Q: What were the negotiations about that you were observing wit[Nguyen Van] Thieu and [Nguyen Cao] Ky?

JOHNSON: Well, in the main it was to get the Vietnamese to come along with us on what we were doing in Paris. Ky wasn't really very important; he was a fighter pilot kind of guy. He certainly was more likeable than Thieu. But not as smart. Thieu could see that from his point of view, this process was not leading to any place very good, that we were withdrawing. Any kind of a deal with the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese was not going to be one that he liked.

On the other hand he couldn't flatly refuse to go along with all this, so they would question, and they would suggest, and we would go back and forth. But basically it was this process of bringing them along so they would sign on the dotted line when that agreement was finally made. It was 1972 by the time we did it.

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But when I was there in Saigon, it was the beginning of that process. You know, would you actually sit at the table with the Viet Cong? Well, no. They would rather not. Of course, we had the whole problem of the shape of the table which became very famous. I found it very hard to describe table shapes in telegrams. We didn't have fax machines in those days and we had to kind of reduce whatever was decided upon in words. But they were obviously very suspicious, very reluctant about the whole process, understandably so, from their point of view.

Q: What were you getting concerning the attitude of Ambassador Bunker and Deputy Ambassador Sam Berger? Was it great frustration or was it just that they saw this as a long process?

JOHNSON: I think they saw it as a long process. It was very hard to know what Ambassador Bunker was thinking. He was a fellow that you would want to back in a poker game. He never seemed to sweat like the rest of us. His clothes never got wrinkled. He was in his 70s at the time. He was carrying out his instructions, whatever they were. Once in a while, after a particularly long or difficult session, he would privately complain about that a little bit. But I think he just saw it as a long process, and his job was to move it along as best he could.

I was the scribe. I'd take telegrams and turn them into talking points when they came in. I didn't do this all the time because my boss, Roger Kirk or Walt Cutler, would be doing it sometimes, and I would be helping them out. They obviously weren't there all the time. We were not the movers of policy. About the only time I ever had any impact on what you might call policy, was when we were going to make a statement in Paris in which we equated our pulling out of Vietnam with the end of the war. I did a telegram saying, "No. It wasn't the end of the war." South Vietnam would still be fighting after we withdrew. We did send that in and that caused some consternation. I don't know why. This would become, I don't know, one of those articles of theology where in Washington they would equate our pull out with the end of the war. Of course, from the American point of view, it was. But it

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was kind of [like] saying the emperor isn't wearing any clothes [i.e., left to themselves the Vietnamese couldn't fight].

Q: While you were doing this, you were also doing the analysis of the Viet Cong and North Vietnam. I guess everything there would be before and after Tet in 1968. Let's do it before 1968. You went in 1967?

JOHNSON: I got there in October 1967. The Tet Offensive in 1968 waat the end of January, so I was pretty much a new boy when it happened.

Q: What were you getting before Tet as far as the state of the VieCong particularly?

JOHNSON: They weren't doing too much, but there were indications that something was up, when you read the captured documents and all the other things that I was reading. We did get one kind of proclamation of a general offensive. But people tended not to believe it because it was a pretty stupid thing to do. I guess the basic feeling, and it is hard to say because I was so new, was that things were going along. We were still a pretty large force in country.

Then the attack took place during Tet, which is the Vietnamese holiday that lasts a week or so. This was supposed to be a time of a truce. I got the impression from reading afterwards of various analysis by the Vietnamese communists of their own conduct, that basically they held back word back from their own people to the very last minute, in order to preserve security.

Of course, that meant that the units that were going to attack weren't able to do what they normally did. Before attacks normally the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese very carefully mapped out what they were going to do and practiced it. Everybody knew what his task was. They were quite meticulous. But by holding back the word until the very last moment, they weren't able to do that and so lots of the attacks were misdirected or got mixed up.

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The squad that was supposed to get the American ambassador went to the wrong house. Some poor Vietnamese doctor was “done.” The American ambassador was not a mystery in Saigon. Any rickshaw driver could have told you where that was. There were other kinds of screw-ups, but at the same time...

Q: The attack on the embassy. I had an interview with Allan Wendt, who was in there, saying that it was essentially a screwed up attack because they could have gotten in.

JOHNSON: Allan is right.

Q: But it wasn't done well. Or at least the theory being that maybe the squad leader was killed and rest of them sort of were milling around.

JOHNSON: Yes. I agree with Allan. When they made the attack that night, and I lived right across the street from the embassy in [an] apartment. My roommate was David G. Brown, as opposed to David E. Brown; we had two David Browns in the political section. Peter Collins was staying with us. He was one of the provincial reporters from the Delta. But when the attack took place, I have had the same theory that Allan Wendt has. Apparently, they blew a hole in the embassy wall, and some fellows came through that hole. The two military policeman, they weren't Marines at the time, at the gate shot it out with these fellows. The military policemen were killed, but they killed the first two or three people through the hole.

I think that must have been the leadership. Because basically for the rest of the night, these fellows milled around and hid behind decorative pots there in the embassy yard. As the Americans responded, the Marines and other people, the firefight went on the rest of the night. They also killed a couple of other military policemen who happened to drive up at just the wrong moment. As I understand it, one of the drivers of the embassy, who was in cahoots with the Viet Cong, smuggled in a fellow who then in his account went to sleep in one of the outer buildings of the embassy and performed no useful function.

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Obviously, if they had done it right, they would have been in thlobby before we knew what was happening.

Q: Yes.

JOHNSON: Allan wouldn't have gone on to fame and fortune as he did. But, they fired some rocket grenades at the embassy from across the street, and they did other things. But, yes, it did not go well for them.

Q: Can you say what you were doing when the attack began. I alwaylike to catch people when... I assume you were asleep.

JOHNSON: I was asleep. It was about 3:00 a.m. There were loud explosions and all kind of shots. We kind of peeked out and thought, "Well, this is very bad." But we couldn't do anything so after awhile we just went back to bed. We figured the apartment didn't have any back door and apparently the Viet Cong were out the front door. So we figured if they come in we're done, and if they don't come in it won't matter. So we went back to bed. Our only weapons were... I had a very blunt saber that a friend of mine had given me when I was in high school. David Brown had a Montagnard crossbow. He did province reporting in the highlands and the crossbow was, in fact, a lethal weapon but probably for only one shot.

We got up 7:00-ish, I guess, when there was another big explosion. We started to go to work. I think work started at 8:00. But there was just so much shooting we thought, "Well, we'll just go a little late today." So I think about 8:30 or 9:00 we got across the street to the embassy. There were bodies everywhere, and we crunched over the glass and went to our offices. My boss, who was I guess Roger Kirk at the time, his office had taken a direct [hit]. You remember the embassy.

Q: It had an outer screen.

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JOHNSON: And that outer screen really did work. So it was a good idea. The outer screen had taken a hit and had gone through into his office. But they had that really good plastic stuff there. Anyway his office was beat up a little bit but not badly. I think the windows were all kind of ajar at the time. So anyway, we went to work. Then General Westmoreland came. The ambassador and we kind of followed them around as they looked at things out of curiosity.

Colonel Jacobson, the mission coordinator, who lived in the house in the compound, had a very close call. One of the Viet Cong group had gotten into his house and had been driven upstairs by tear gas, and Jacobson at the time didn't have any weapon. But at the last moment they tossed him a pistol, and he shot the fellow.

Q: I remember seeing that on T.V.

JOHNSON: He came up to me and in a jocular way said that because I was seen as the communist guy in the political section I should control my people better and not send them under his house and stuff. Of course, all of these reports are coming in from all over the country. The embassy itself was just a part of it. There was a big fight going on in Cholon. There had been an attack on the presidential palace, which had [failed]. There was other shooting going on all around town. I remember driving someplace or other, and there were roadblocks. Somebody, a Vietnamese gentleman, I think, hadn't stopped quickly enough at a roadblock and was shot.

Everybody was on the TV. Everybody was coming in with their own particular stories. There had been attacks on houses and on some of the CIA hotels and other kind of things. All very exciting. Political section people straggled in. I remember lunchtime. Because David and I lived across the street, we were the closest around, and we basically had a whole bunch of people to lunch. We had our rations and we fed them all.

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Then that night, Allan Wendt having done his duty - normally you did the duty there for a week, but it was felt I guess that he had enough pressure put on him, so David and I had the duty the next night. The night after the attack. We sat up there, and we cooked some canned food. The Ambassador had some sort of little hotplate and we cooked ourselves some beans. Then we went downstairs, and there was a platoon of the 101st Airborne Division which had landed on the roof of the embassy at the end of the battle and kind of come down through the embassy. I don't think they actually had to fight anybody as it turned out.

But they were still there and were manning the perimeter and things, but a bunch of them were inside the lobby. For some reason we had the movie, "Barbarella."

Q: With Jane Fonda!

JOHNSON: So we put it on in the lobby of the embassy for the 101st Airborne Division and some drivers and odds and ends, and David and I watched "Barbarella." One problem with movies in Vietnam, which you may recall, was that whenever you got to really sexy bits, they would go off the sprockets because the units before you would always have run those parts through [many times]. "Barbarella" did have some sexy parts and would keep going off the sprockets and the guys from 101st were very unhappy about that. But we got through the night and nothing happened. There was a tank sitting in the intersection in front of the embassy which would shoot if anything moved. We hoped they wouldn't. It was a very confused time. [We were trying to figure out] what was going on in all these towns. There were big battles all over the delta and we were trying to keep track of it all. My job was [to follow] the communists. People were trying to put this jigsaw together to try to figure out what was going on.

People that you knew had been captured or killed. Hugh Lobet, my old buddy who was in the Operations Center with me, got killed down in the delta some days later. All this was going on at one time. It took awhile to kind of settle down. Then in May, this was the end

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of January, at the end of May there was, what some people called the “mini-Tet” in which we had another real rush at Saigon. Big battles out in Cholon. A German diplomatic friend of mine got captured and killed in that. He and I were supposed to meet for tennis. He decided to swing through Cholon to see what was going on and didn't make it.

During the first part of Tet, one of our problems was because everybody was going to our apartment to eat, David G. and I very soon ran out of food. We decided to go to the commissary which was in Cholon to get more food. The Viet Cong, the communists, were kind of between us and that part of Cholon. So we had to go around them to get to the commissary. We were among the first people there. We were kind of surprised. Anyway, we went in and loaded up. I had a Triumph convertible car. We loaded up as much as we could and started to come back. We decided for some reason to go around the other side of them coming back. We went up a street and all the refugees were going that way and turned out to be a bad idea. Anyway somebody opened up on us with a machine gun. We showed what a great U-turn you could do in a Triumph Herald and made it back with our stuff, unscathed.

Q: Were you getting, obviously this was more sort of the CIA province but well, were people saying to you, “Well, why the hell didn't you tell us this was going to happen?” I mean, this is like miscalling an election or something.

JOHNSON: No. No one said that to me. That really wasn't my job. But there were indications. I think I mentioned before in the northern part of the country they jumped off a day earlier. It always was a mystery to me as to why. It is hard to remember the Vietnamese communist organization of South Vietnam, of course, which was different than our side's organization of South Vietnam.

But in any case, the commands in the North, which dealt directly with Hanoi, jumped off a day ahead of the commands in the South, which dealt with Hanoi through the Central

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Office for South Vietnam [COSVN]. So that kind of discombobulated everybody. At least in my case, no, they didn't ask me why I hadn't predicted it.

Q: After this was over, the big Tet and all this, what were you getting from what you were seeing from the Viet Cong?

JOHNSON: Golly. Well, there were lots of after action reports on their parts. The battles had been mostly disastrous from their point of view. They had lost lots of leadership. They had lost lots of their soldiers. It had really hurt them. A lot of them were unhappy about what happened. Obviously, from the macro-political point of view, it was a success and the government of Hanoi was certainly trumpeting it as such. But in the South, on the Viet Cong side, they had a lot of unhappy campers about what had happened.

I think it came as a surprise to a lot of them. We think of this as being entirely propaganda but a lot of them really did believe that there was going to be the general uprising, that when they came into these cities and towns that the rest of the population of South Vietnam was going to rise up and join them. That didn't happen anywhere. That was disillusioning to a lot of their folks.

It meant, of course, over time that the North Vietnamese role became even greater for if no other reason than the elimination of so many South Vietnamese cadres. Then the North Vietnamese Army had to take a larger role as well. But it was hard on them.

Q: What were you getting before and after Tet in North Vietnam about our feeling about the leadership there and what they were after?

JOHNSON: Well, it was very hard to know anything about what the leadership was about. There were various people that had theories about hard-liners and soft-liners and rivalries and the position of Ho Chi Minh, who was still alive at the time. Ho Chi Minh died, I guess, in September of 1968.

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Q: 1969.

JOHNSON: 1969, you are right.

Q: I was on home leave. My wife woke me up and said that he died. I think before I rolled over and went back to sleep I said, "May he rot in hell."

JOHNSON: I remember it was September because it was just at Vietnamese National Day. But you are probably right that it was 1969. So he was still around. Nobody really knew very much, really, about [the leaders'] relationships [to each other] or what difference it made if one succeeded and the other didn't.

Q: *Because this is all much newer, we didn't have the equivalent of our criminologist who really watched who was where.*

JOHNSON: There was really a very small community of people who followed North Vietnam. When I got sort of pitchforked into it, I looked around for the literature and stuff. There really was very little on them. There didn't seem to be that many people in Washington or in Vietnam or in Saigon actually following them from a political point of view. I was always a little bit shocked by that. That even after a few months I was the authority mainly because I had memorized the names of the people in the Politburo.

The CIA wasn't getting anything from the inner circles of the North Vietnamese leadership. We did get some political reporting from Hanoi from the French and the British. The French had a delegation general there, [headed by] quite a good man. We managed to kill him by dropping a bomb on the delegation general building or his residence. I'm not too sure exactly the timing of that, his mistress and him. The British had a little consulate and did reporting which they often shared with us. So we got some flavor of things up in Hanoi from that.

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Obviously, we also had interrogation reports of North Vietnamese soldiers. It wasn't all "Name, rank, serial number, and date of birth." It was also, "How are things at home? How did the conscription process work? How was everybody eating?" and all those kind of questions. They always seemed to be having problems up there in North Vietnam. Things were not great, but [there was] nothing to suggest that they were going to break up or give up the struggle.

You would get defectors as well. My favorite defector was an Esperantist who was drafted into the North Vietnamese Army. They wouldn't let him correspond with other Esperantists, which I guess is the major activity of other Esperantists. So, immediately upon arriving in the south, he defected. I guess the interrogator asked him what he planned to do now that he was in the south, and he explained that he planned to teach Esperanto. I don't know how that worked out for him.

Q: Well, for somebody who might not be familiar with this, Esperanto was touted at least in the 1920s as a world language based on sort of Latin, Spanish in a way.

JOHNSON: We would have these odd people that would come down. I guess the vacuum cleaner parts of the draft. Certainly when you read the accounts of the soldiers, when you read the captured documents and the interrogation reports about how very difficult it was on the other side, how many people got killed and what their lives were like. One of their strengths was that they basically, as is the nature of guerilla warfare, got to chose when they were going to fight. That they could be at 50% of efficiency for five months but on "the" day they would be at 95 but the fellows on the other side would maybe be at 75.

For most of them, if you really looked at the timeline, they didn't fight that much. There were long periods in between which were not easy. [There] were periods of subsisting and that kind of thing. Then [there were] these occasional clashes, and you read about their terror of things like B-52s. They seemed to get advance word on B-52s most of the time. I guess the Russians had trawlers off Guam where they were taking off. Somehow or

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another, they usually had a pretty good idea of where the bombs were going to land. Quite frequently, you would read an interrogation report where the fellows would all be sitting around the camp and suddenly the word would come to get up and march as quickly as you can in this direction. Half an hour later, the place would get blasted. They weren't always successful of course, in that. They did suffer horribly from it.

But in the North, there were politics; there were rivalries. Obviously, we knew very little about them. I think it was kind of like watching shadows on the wall. We really didn't know that much about what was going on in the inner circles of their government. But they obviously were committed to the struggle.

Q: How about the information that you were getting from the CIA during this time that you were doing this?

JOHNSON: I don't think it told me too much. I don't know. I'm not too sure who was responsible for all these things. You know, a hand in the interrogations and things which was certainly useful of soldiers and other people of cadres that were caught. But just plain old CIA reports, well, at this distance, it is now 25-30 years, it doesn't make much of an impression on me. FBIS on the other hand was very useful all the time. We always went over that in a criminological kind of way trying to track who was hot and who was not for whatever reason.

Q: I mean, did you learn to read "Communis," the communist language newspaper?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. [This was] what the French call, "Langue du bois," kind of turgid, turgid stuff. You really paid your dues. They would give long and interminable speeches. I always wondered about them as communications tools because General Giap, for instance, would give a speech that would be three hours long. This was an instruction to the lads. Then [about] 10 Americans who followed Vietnamese affairs very closely would get together, and everybody would argue about what he meant. It always seemed to me that if people who were relatively knowledgeable about what was going on couldn't agree

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on what he meant, how was this being used as a tool for communicating with the lower echelons of the communist structure.

Those kind of speeches would be analyzed on their side, and they would have classes and stuff in which I guess perhaps somebody would say "What Comrade Giap really meant was that we are supposed to work in the jungle for the next six months rather than throw ourselves on the wire." I don't know. But it was murky stuff. It was turgid stuff. You read and read and read and look for those little changes in really criminological kind of stuff.

The North Vietnamese were never as precise I guess, as the apparently the Soviets were. Sometimes you would get kind of false leads where you would get excited about some change that really wasn't that significant.

Q: By the way, had Douglas Pike written his book on "Victor Charlie?"

JOHNSON: He had written that, and I had read it.

Q: So I mean, was this considered a fairly solid book? How did you feel about it?

JOHNSON: Yes. It was a good book. One problem is that Pike, tremendously knowledgeable, wrote almost as turgidly as Giap. So it was kind of hard to wade through. But it was a useful book at the time. Obviously, later events showed some of the things that he put forward weren't necessarily true.

Q: What was your impression of our military intelligence at that time?

JOHNSON: Well, I was concerned with the strategic kinds of things and obviously the military was producing things like... Of course, this was the raw stuff, the captured documents and the interrogations and that kind of thing. They were pretty good. The problem was that the people I dealt with at MACV [the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] were very intelligent folks [but] would come in and be there for six months and

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then go. So you got a kind of a turnover. Dumb as I was, I was there for three and a half years. Therefore accumulated a certain amount of knowledge.

Q: This was something I found. I chaired something called the "Irregular Practices" committee which was essentially a civilian court martial. We are talking about 1969-70. And I found after six months I was able to give historical perspective to the rest of the people around there. It was badly done in a way, particularly on the military side. They were using it too much as a personnel "getting your ticket punched" type operation.

JOHNSON: That was certainly - and this wasn't my subject - true on the fighting side of things. The people I was dealing with, one was Chuck Meissner, who later went on to be the Assistant Secretary of Commerce and died with Ron Brown on the plane. He was doing Cambodia and stuff. Larry Pressler, who was for a long time the Senator from South Dakota, you'd get people like that and others who were Ph.D.s and had really good education, but they weren't army/military careerists like say the fellow commanding the battalion. But that was just the way they worked. They did that for six months and they did something else for six months. As you suggest, after about eight months you were the grand old man of whatever subject you were dealing with. It was stupid. It was stupid in my little bailiwick and it was stupid in other places as well. But I think particularly in my bailiwick because you could say about a battalion commander for instance that the demands-psychological and everything-were so great on that kind of job that maybe six months was all you really could do. That wasn't the case in MACV. Certainly a year wouldn't have been untoward or even longer. But that was a problem out there. But this was the strategic kind of stuff. It doesn't have to do with who is going to come over the wire tomorrow or what was happening in the A Shau Valley.

Q: In the political section, how did they use what you had?

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JOHNSON: Mainly, I did little telegrams back to Washington which somebody must have read. I don't get the impression that I had a great effect on the way thinking was done at the top.

Q: Were there people, for example, in our political section, who would sit down and look to you for information concerning Vietnam? There is the internal politic guy and maybe somebody else. Would you all sit down and say, "Where are we going" or something like this or was it pretty much compartmentalized?

JOHNSON: Not too much. The ambassador sent in, I think it was weekly kind of personal reports to Washington which I think were probably drafted in large part by the minister-counselor for political affairs. Art Calhoun was the first minister-counselor; Martin Herz. Galen Stone was the number two in the political section. We never saw those reports. Maybe there was some of this synthesis in that. But I didn't get the impression that there was ever that great an interest, certainly in what the North Vietnamese were saying or doing. Not that much in what the Viet Cong were doing.

The embassy spent a lot of its time worrying about what the South Vietnamese were doing, that was it.

Q: You were one of the younger officers and part of the political section which had these provincial reporters who were out all the time. I understand the system was set up because we really wanted to have something other than rely on our American military advisors to take a look.

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: *What were you getting during this 1967-70 period?*

JOHNSON: Their reports were generally much more pessimistic than what the army was saying. They were always getting themselves in trouble with the military. They went

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around and chatted up people, Vietnamese and Americans all over. Then wrote these reports. Invariably when the report didn't reflect credit on the United States or didn't reinforce whatever the accepted view was, the military reaction was to try to find out who had squealed rather than check the validity of the report. So they were always having a kind of rocky time of it in provincial reporting. It was never easy.

I wasn't intimately involved. My roommate at least for a long time, David Brown, and later Lars Hydle as my roommate, were both in that kind of thing. But I could see these kind of tensions going on. Andy Antippas who, in the second part of my time in Saigon, was in the external section with me and did Cambodia, and of course, Cambodia hotted up. He did some reporting which the military didn't like. That got him in trouble. I was kind of a little tranquil little island because no one knew or cared that much about what was going on with the Viet Cong. There wasn't that much analysis for me to struggle against.

Q: You left there when in 1970?

JOHNSON: I guess it was June or July of 1970.

Q: So we left at almost exactly same time. I left the first of July. What was your impression of whither South Vietnam at the time you left that time?

JOHNSON: Well, I guess it just seemed me that it was interminable. I didn't see any end. I didn't see that we were any closer to the end. I guess I had been there so long and the situation had been so long that I just saw it as kind of part of life, as something that was going on. I didn't have any end scenario. We of course had these negotiations going on - but at that time - it is a little hard for me to remember when all these things happened - but at that time, we were really just the beginnings the negotiations in Paris.

We were essentially trying to win the war by attrition. There was all the "hearts and minds" kind of stuff. But the only way you could get the North Vietnamese to stop sending those folks down was to kill enough of them, and we didn't seem to be doing that. We were

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obviously killing a lot of them, but their willingness to persevere didn't seem to be that much eroded, or eroded at all. So therefore the war would continue.

The other way you might have won the war was to invade the North as we invaded North Korea. But there were lots of reasons why we didn't do that. It was never really contemplated as far as I know. So it just seemed that the war was going to go on. On the other hand, I don't think that I saw the South Vietnamese as being quite as fragile as they turned out to be in the long run. Of course, the situation was really quite different in 1975, but it was a little hard to see how the war was going to end.

Q: I'd like to end this session at this point. Where did you get assigned to in summer of 1970?

JOHNSON: I was assigned to the Vietnamese Working Group in Washington at the Department of State.

Q: Today is the 21st of January, 1997. Steve, you were with the Vietnamese Working Group from when to when?

JOHNSON: I guess its proper name was the Vietnam Working Group. I was the one who used "Vietnamese" in the first place. I was there from basically from the fall or late summer of 1970 until January of 1973, when I went back to Vietnam for six months. Then I rejoined it for a period.

Q: Well, we'll just pick up this 1970-73 period. Who was running this group when you arrived?

JOHNSON: You are really catching me out here. I guess it was Jim Engle who was in charge of the Vietnam Working Group at that time. Bill Sullivan was the Deputy Assistant

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Secretary with whom we dealt, and Roger Kirk was kind of his special assistant working on negotiations. Negotiations were, of course, going on in Paris at the time.

Q: Did you find a different atmosphere in the Washington group, although Roger Kirk had just been out there when you had been out there and others? Did you find a different attitude, outlook, than you had when you were at the embassy?

JOHNSON: Not particularly, no. Again, I had my own little bailiwick. I was the again, the Communist guy, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, and so I wasn't so much involved in our relations with South Vietnam and their various troubles and sins and difficulties. I was kind of off to the side in a sense. I was worrying about what the Vietnamese communists were doing.

Q: In the first place, I don't think I asked but while you were doing sort of North Vietnamese watching and Viet Cong watching-I guess in 1969, Ho Chi Minh died. Were you and others watching to see if this was going to make a difference?

JOHNSON: Well, lots of people were. There was lots of speculation. My view was that it wouldn't make much of a difference. Ho Chi Minh was kind of a generation ahead of the rest of the politburo in Hanoi and had handed on most of the daily responsibility to other people. Certainly the succession went smoothly and predictably. One of the things was that everybody said was, "Who is going to succeed Ho Chi Minh?" Well, nobody succeeded Ho Chi Minh. What he did was divide it up and there wasn't another Ho Chi Minh. But the other folks who were there had same idea of unifying Vietnam and bringing it under their communist party control.

Q: You were doing this at a very active time as far as negotiations were concerned. Since our people were sitting down looking across the table or tables or whatever you want to say but conducting negotiations with the North Vietnamese. I imagine there might

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have been quite a lively market in who are these people, what is making them tick at this particular point?

JOHNSON: There was. People were interested. We really had a lot of the information about the attitudes of individuals. You could get that kind of curriculum vitae kind of stuff about people without too much difficulty, but Le Duc Tho was the principal interlocutor in Paris from time to time. I am not too sure about all the timing of all of this. He of course wasn't there chief delegate. He went and kind of visited and dealt with people from time to time. But what was Le Duc Tho's particular attitude, and did that differ in any way from other people in the politburo? You really were talking about speculation there.

There was always a lot of argument and a kind of intense analysis about the hawks and doves in the Vietnamese communist hierarchy, I guess with some expectation that somehow or other they would mirror our own problems. All this was based, it always seemed to me, on very little evidence. We just didn't know that much. Obviously they must have. They did differ about tactics and things. They were obviously ambitious men, and some of them were no doubt willing to sink the knife bureaucratically into the back of others. But it was mostly speculation.

Q: Did you have any close relationship to the CIA analysis people and so on?

JOHNSON: I used to see them [perhaps] monthly. We had meetings over at the White House where Bill Stearman who had been in INR and was now in the Asia part of the National Security Council staff would convene these things. There would be people from the CIA, people that very frequently I knew from Saigon and from the military and various others. As I used to say, "pooling our ignorance" about these things.

Some of it had to do with how many soldiers were coming on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and what are they up to, and [some] had to do with, as I say, speculation about the political attitudes in Hanoi.

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Q: Were we able to get a pretty good feel about the role of the Viet Cong vis a vis the North Vietnamese as time went on?

JOHNSON: We had as it turned out, quite an accurate picture of the apparatus, the Communist apparatus in the South, I'd guess you'd call it. We knew their political-military organization of the South, the various commands. For the most part we knew who the individuals were that were holding commands. There was always great speculation about the number 2 man at Central Office for South Vietnam who had a number of pseudonyms. Again, we had him right, too. Lyn Van Lin, who was normally called Muy Cuc in the papers, happily went to Ho Chi Minh's funeral, which was useful.

We knew that the national liberation front was just froth, that it didn't amount to anything. It had no operational significance. Various Vietnamese communist political-military organizations took their orders from Hanoi, some of them directly from Hanoi in the northern part of South Vietnam, and others through the Central Office for South Vietnam, which was always headed by a very senior party figure. One time, Le Duc Tho and later General Nguyen Chih Tho, who was killed, and then for the balance of the war, Pham Hung, who was a politburo member. We knew what it was, and we knew pretty much how it ran.

The Viet Cong or the Vietnamese communists had a different organization of the country. Their provinces didn't necessarily correspond to South Vietnamese provinces and sometimes had different names. So that was in my job, at least, or if you were in intelligence, you had to keep these two kind of political organizations in mind in their relationships to each other.

Another one that used to crop up every now and then as anomalous attacks was that the Viet Cong operated on Hanoi time, which was an hour ahead of Saigon time. Every now and then you would have an attack that wouldn't make sense unless you thought about the fact that if it took place an hour later it would have made sense. Like the rocketing of the

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national day parade in downtown Saigon which took place an hour before anything was supposed to happen there.

Q: What was the progress during this 1970-73 period on the peactalks?

JOHNSON: Well, they were going on. We on the Working Group had a very hard time knowing what was going on. Mr. Kissinger was doing the most important negotiation, and he kept his cards close to his vest. In fact, sometimes it was only through intelligence that we learned what the United States was doing in the negotiations or had some hints at what we were doing. But they were progressing.

Of course, at the end of 1972, we actually arrived at an agreement which all four parties - the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, Saigon, and the United States - signed on to.

Q: Was there concern within this working group about the U.S. Congress and all and sort of public opinion seeing that we were beginning to lose it here?

JOHNSON: Yes. People could perceive that. I forget the timing of it, but there was the great, great big demonstration in which anti-war folks tried to kind of shut down Washington. I think that must have been 1970. But there were other demonstrations. You could certainly, anybody in the United States could see that the tide of public opinion was going against continuing the war.

At the same time, of course, the United States under President Nixon's Vietnamization program was slowly withdrawing our combat units and other units from Vietnam. So our presence there was going down considerably.

Q: Were you getting at all from the American military with whom you were dealing about their feelings about how the war was conducted or had been conducted?

JOHNSON: Most of the people I dealt with were kind of intelligence people rather than operational people. Of course I knew officers who had actually been in the war, and most

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of them, a lot of them regretted and thought that they could have done better if they had been left to employ more means, that they had their arms tied behind them and they had other various complaints about the way the war was being fought. Certainly a lot of them thought the system of the one year tours and the lack of unit cohesion was detrimental to the army.

Q: Did you find within this working group that there were hawks and doves?

JOHNSON: I don't remember that being the case, no. We had a little bit of hawks and doves—at least one or two doves in Saigon at least. Of course, now it is a number of years away from that. I just can't remember whom I would really characterize in the Vietnam Working Group as a dove. There were certainly pessimists and optimists. I guess increasingly, pessimists by that time. I don't remember doves, no.

Q: Was there the CIA versus the INR viewpoint or was it a pretty of how we were looking at, particularly from your perspective of how we were looking at the Viet Cong and North Vietnam?

JOHNSON: I don't recall any really great conflicts there. The community of people that followed the Vietnamese communists was pretty small. Frank Snepp, who later on wrote a book about what happened to the CIA right at the fall of 1975, was one of the fellows from the CIA. And there were certainly arguments about various data. In my perception, there really wasn't a CIA view of what was going on and an INR view.

Q: Snepps' book is called "Indecent Interlude."

JOHNSON: Yes.

Q: Were you getting any readings at all at the time of the negotiations, I may be wrong, but wasn't it Christmas of 1972 or so where there was the heavy bombing of Hanoi

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and we upped the pressure. How was that perceived when that happened as far as its effectiveness? And after it happened, what was the analysis?

JOHNSON: Well, I think it was seen as pretty effective. Since we weren't privy to exactly what was going on in the negotiations, it was a little hard to know. But obviously the negotiations did achieve an agreement very soon afterwards. A lot of people, the more hawkish ones, wondered why we hadn't done it before. During the war there was this [protest] against the bombing of North Vietnam. Certainly there was great questions about its effectiveness in actually influencing the war.

But the bombing of North Vietnam was, as the Air Force and Navy people who ran the missions would complain, was very circumspect. There were lots of things we never targeted, one of them being Hanoi, and some of the facilities around it. So to actually go after targets in that area seemed to have a salutary effect on the minds of the North Vietnamese.

I think it was also the same time that we also mined the harbor, as mining the harbors was kind of a more passive thing to do, which nevertheless would have given the North Vietnamese... You can find mines and pick them up.

Nevertheless, it did make for difficulties, but they finally did arrive at the agreement and I guess it must have been Christmas. At the same time, just a bit before, that there had been a large Vietnamese communist offensive which was fought off. By this time the United States forces had been drawn way down. But you could still bring the B-52s to bear which were always useful when there was a large concentration of folks on the other side making attacks.

There was some very, very heavy fighting at the time in which the South Vietnamese you know, generally, did pretty well.

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Q: How did you hear about the terms of the peace accords? Did you hear it the same time everybody else did?

JOHNSON: I expect it is a little hard for me to remember, but yes, I think so. We sort of got copies of them very soon afterward, and we read them. One of the things that went on that we haven't touched on during this whole time is the "Pentagon Papers" escapade.

Q: Ah, yes. Could you explain what that was?

JOHNSON: Well, the Pentagon Papers, I forget the timing of it. But Mr. McNamara while he was Secretary of Defense asked for a study of the whole range of Vietnam [issues], what were our decisions internally and also what were our diplomatic efforts. There had been all during the war kind of different initiatives, diplomatic initiatives, sometimes private ones to try to bring about peace talks. Those were written about.

In any case, this all ended up with I think was 40 some volumes of these things. Top Secret they were. This was before I arrived back in Washington, but in any case they apparently had been sent to the Department of State. You have been in the Department of State, forty-some volumes of Top Secret-no one ever looked at it. It was sent immediately to the bowels of some deep recess of the filing system of the Department. Everybody forgot about it. I had never known about it.

So when the New York Times started publishing it, this was a complete surprise not only to those of us on the desk but to those people on the "Seventh Floor" of the Department. Those that had ever heard of them had forgotten about them long before. Most of them never heard about it. So the first thing that happened was that, of course, people wanted to know what was coming. This was coming in kind of installments. The government made an effort to have a restraint on this. There was a case that went to the Supreme Court saying that you couldn't do this. I forget exactly the basis on doing it. Presumably, it was

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going to hurt national security, and it was Top Secret, and it was stolen and whatever other basis.

But no one knew what was in these books. No one who was then in the top or even the working levels of the Department of State. So there was a kind of a mobilization of a whole bunch of us who had served in Vietnam or worked on the working group. We were in one of the conference rooms of the Department, and they kind of distributed all these around. Everybody got a volume or two. The volumes were not uniform in size, and you had the job of kind of going through it as quickly as possible because the court cases were going on all the time and trying to discover what was in there. Bill Macomber was the deputy under secretary for management at the time, kind of the point man for the Department in the legal case.

Obviously these were subjective judgements about what was sensitive and what might hurt national security were it revealed today. Most of the stuff of the "Pentagon Papers" was not that exciting. It was historical. Some of it was already common knowledge. But there was this effort as we went through to try to pick out what could be used in this court case. I kind of went to the Department and didn't come home for a couple of days. You went all night and we tried to put together the papers to go to the court. Now all this [was] going on, on the fly. Everybody trying to discover what was in these things.

This was before the days of computers and the like, and so getting all this typed up in a form to go to the Supreme Court was difficult. You know, when you are working at say 3:30 in the morning and tired with secretaries, it was a real physical feat. Anyway we went through all that, and then the government lost the case and the New York Times and the Washington Post and other newspapers and then books went forward with the text from the "Pentagon Papers."

Q: What was the feeling that you got from it? Was there much of it there that was a problem?

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JOHNSON: Not really. Obviously the public survived. I didn't think from my point of view there weren't any revelations. All of this was a while ago now, but basically there were things on the negotiations which I guess would have been embarrassing or might have been embarrassing for the particular people involved and for the governments that had acted as intermediaries but were saying something else publically when they were doing this privately. So there were these kinds of things. In the long run of diplomacy, if you are shown not to be able to keep confidences, it will hurt you in some other way. It doesn't hurt you directly so much.

But there weren't any real surprises. Some of this, of course, I was just one of just a bunch of people reading it on the fly. Some of the history was rather interesting you know. I didn't really know some of the things that had gone on in the 1950s in those days and exactly what we were doing, and the French were pulling out and all that kind of stuff. Some of it was mildly embarrassing, but of course the people that had done it were pretty much gone from government.

Q: The people in the Vietnam working group knew Vietnam. They had been there and most had lived it for the last half decade or more. When you saw the peace accords, what was the general feeling?

JOHNSON: Well, I think the general feeling was, I guess, contradictory. On the one hand, most of us couldn't believe that it would really work, but at the same time, we kind of hoped against hope that it would, that somehow or other that because we had this agreement that maybe just maybe in spite of the kind of logic of the situation maybe peace could actually ensue. But I think that when you got away from that kind of euphoria over getting the agreement, most of us were pessimistic that it really could last.

Q: Did you find that your superiors trying were to put the best face on things? Or was that sort of the marching orders?

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JOHNSON: Well, it is hard to know. I guess they were trying to say that it would be carried out, and we were going to do our best to make it work. For me personally at the time, one of the things that happened in connection with the agreement was that there was a decision by the Department to send, well it started out with 100 officers but finally got down to 45 officers who had been to Vietnam before and had some experience there, to on a six-month TDY tour of Vietnam to strengthen the reporting and other aspects of the embassy and the consulates. I was one of them.

So at the time, in Vietnam, there were... Well, I am not to sure when they were all set up. They had a consulate at Nha Trang, a consulate at Hue, one in Bien Hoa in III CORPS, and Kontum in IV CORPS. A consulate was in each of the core areas, and so all of these officers were sent back, including me. I wasn't in Washington during that time whether a spin was being put on things. I was zooming out to South Vietnam again.

Q: You arrived there in 1973?

JOHNSON: I got there towards the end of January 1973 and was theruntil August.

Q: Where did you go?

JOHNSON: My first job was in the embassy. There was a little group of four of us - John Helble as the chief, Vern Penner, and myself - that was established to help set up the International Control Commission. I guess the ICSC, the International Commission of Security and Control, I guess it was, which was a four nation organization of Canada, Indonesia, Hungary, and Poland which was established under the agreement to monitor compliance with the agreement. Our job was to help these people. They came in, they were for the most part, military organizations but with diplomats as well, and they divided the country up into seven areas. They had people in the headquarters and, I guess, in the provinces. There were lots of practical problems with getting these people set up. The way

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they did it was Helble spoke Indonesian. Shepard spoke Hungarian. Penner spoke Polish, and as I say, I spoke "Canadian."

The Canadians were the easiest because, practically speaking, they... The American army was doing its final pullout. The American military left except for a military attach# of a sort of military assistance group, in March of 1973. They were turning over equipment to this organization. The Canadian sergeants got together with the American sergeants and somehow the typewriters and jeeps and air conditioners that worked ended up largely in Canadian hands. The Poles and Indonesians and others-the Hungarians kind of wondered why theirs didn't work so well. They really didn't understand the schmoozing aspect of it all. So the other guys had a harder job because they had to try to make sure or try to see that justice was done towards this or these other folks.

Q: One has to know that the sergeants run the army in any country and the Canadians and the American sergeants knew how to put this thing together.

JOHNSON: They did. I got around the country that time much more than I did my previous three years because my duties required me to visit a lot of these places. The Canadians had grown old and cynical in the previous ICC, which continued to exist in Laos and I don't know about North Vietnam or Cambodia. I guess it had disappeared in Cambodia, but did exist in Laos. Anyway, they had a bunch of veterans from the ICC in their organization. So they made a real college try to make this thing work and actually investigate cease fire violations and other violations of the accord.

But it was soon brought to a halt by the Hungarians and the Poles and ended up being rather so inert that the Canadians withdrew after awhile. Their places were taken by the Iranians. Much to Marshall Green's pleasure because then he was able to say that they were "Kurds in Hue." But any case that was very interesting-that three months that I worked on that.

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One of the other things that was going on at the time once this control commission had kind of settled down there wasn't a need for a group of four of us to work on it anymore. Particularly since the Canadians could take care of themselves, I was transferred to the consulate general, I guess it was in Nha Trang, and my basic job there was to be the head of the political section.

Jim Engle was the consul general, but he had gone back to Washington in anticipation of going to Phnom Penh as charg# d'affaires, so Dick Teare effectively ran the consulate. We had in each of the 12 provinces of Two CORPS a reporting officer, and every one of these reporting officers spoke Vietnamese and had spent two, three, four years or even more in Vietnam before. They were people that had gone back as I had.

There were similar establishments in the other three consulates, and all of these officers had been guaranteed for the Department before they went out that their reporting would not be messed with in any way by the consulates or embassy. In other words, whatever they wanted to send in would go in without any expurgations or other [changes]. We would correct their spelling, but that was it. So there was an incredible amount of reporting that was done by really experienced officers. I don't know who was reading all this back in Washington, but it mostly went in the form of Airgrams.

But each one of these little provinces had a full-time political reporter that was basically able to send in what ever he wanted. The consulate in Nha Trang put out an incredible amount of reporting, and we really did have a pretty good picture of what was going on in the country. What was going on was an erosion of the cease fire, a kind of pushing forward by the communists, and a little bit of pushing forward by the Saigon government as well.

Of course, there was the usual reporting on the fecklessness of the civil administration of South Vietnam. There were other problems and the corruption and the like, but the most important part was that the communists were obviously using the cease fire to kind of prepare the way to continue their effort to take over South Vietnam.

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Q: When you left, were you talking to Vietnamese officials as you went around?

JOHNSON: I didn't do much of that myself. My job was basically kind of an editorial one; as I mentioned earlier, I didn't speak Vietnamese. We had all these veteran officers who were doing the reporting, and my job was to funnel all these handwritten things that would come in and turn them into reports - and kind of shape them up and get them approved. As I say, you could only clean up the prose a little bit. There wasn't any real editing by the consulate. Some contact with local officials in Nha Trang, but not too much of that, since Dick Teare was doing that.

At the same time, we also were assisting [in] searching out crash sites trying to make determinations as to "missing in actions" and the like. I went on a few of those expeditions.

Q: When you left there what did you come back with I mean as far as from what you'd absorbed on this?

JOHNSON: Well, I guess that I came back with the judgement that the kind of reconciliation and peaceful evolution, if not envisaged in the peace agreement was at least hoped for in the peace agreement, was not going to happen - that most likely the war would continue. During the time I was there, the war continued at a rather low level. There really wasn't much going on in the way of military activity. There was some. There was building of roads and other kinds of things but not the large armed clashes that took place later.

Q: You came back in summer of 1973, back to the working group?

JOHNSON: Yes. Back to the working group. I guess I was just there for a little while. I am a little hazy on the timing because then I had been assigned to study Lao to go the embassy in Vientiane. So then I spent the next 11 months or 10 months studying Lao.

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That took me to June of 1974. But I was a student at FSI, all by myself most of the time, trying to learn that rather difficult language.

Q: How did you find learning Lao? What sort of language is it?

JOHNSON: Lao is very close to Thai. It is a tonal language, but it is simpler. I don't know Thai, but my impression is that it is simpler than Thai. The spelling system is a completely different system than Latin letters, but once you understand that words are spelled like they sound, the elaboration of forms of address, depending on the speakers, is less sophisticated in Lao than it is in Thai. So it had its difficulties, but it could have been worse I guess.

Q: You went to Laos and served there from when to when?

JOHNSON: I served in Laos from June 1974 to July 1976.

Q: What was the situation in Laos in 1974?

JOHNSON: Well, the situation was that there had been a coalition government formed in 1973-I guess it was September. It was called the Provisional Government of National Union. There was still a king, but the ministries and things-they were communist ministers and nationalist or rightist ministers, I guess you can call them, and neutralists ministers. The government, at least formally at the top, was a coalition government, though there still existed areas that were under the complete control of the Laos communists, the Pathet Lao, as they are called. The Pathet Lao in "Lao" just means "country of Lao." So there were kind of no-go areas of the country.

But there wasn't formal fighting going on at the time. The country was still effectively divided. You had a situation at least in Vientiane where you had ministries which had a communist as a minister or a communist as the number two or a rightist in the other

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position. You had several Lao communist garrisons in town as well. So it was a peculiar situation.

Q: Were there certain people you could talk to and others you couldn't talk to?

JOHNSON: No. We could talk to any of them. Mr. Charles Whitehouse was the ambassador. Chris Chapman was the DCM. Dick Teare, whom I had been with in Nha Trang, was the head of the political section. We didn't have any restrictions about talking to the communists. In fact, we talked to them all the time. The ambassador had one amusing incident when he arrived at the boat races and found one other group there - Mr. Whitehouse, a very outgoing man, gave them all an embrace, and it turned out the North Korean embassy minister there who I think almost had a heart attack. Whitehouse didn't get bothered by it. But no, we didn't have any problem with that. We, in the normal course of business, certainly dealt with the Lao communists.

Q: Well, Laos had the reputation of being practically a CIA country at one time. Had that passed by the time you got there?

JOHNSON: No. They were still very important. The chief of station was obviously a potentate unto himself. You know that was still going on. There still was a "secret" army. They weren't secret anymore, but they still had a very large operation. The military defense department I think had 45 officers. Under the agreement, they were restricted on how many they could have. The defense attache was a major-general, later on a brigadier general. He also had a rear headquarters right across the river. So it was a pretty big operation still. The USAID [mission] was still there in great numbers and were sprinkled around the country. The figure that kind of sticks in my mind was that we had about 1400 Americans not counting women and children. There were people, particularly in AID that had lived in Laos for 12 or 13 years. It was a very comfortable place for families and the like. There was an American school kind of like, maybe not small town living but at least medium town living in Vientiane.

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Q: Were we trying to do anything in Laos?

JOHNSON: We were trying I guess to do what we could to encourage a real coalition government and at the same time encourage the better elements in what you might call the "rightist" side of the government in their endeavors. There were certain generals and certain politicians that we found to be pretty good people and that we were-we wanted this coalition to be a permanent one in a sense and to really bring peace in Laos. I think that the perception was that the difference between all the sides there weren't that great and Laos being such a small country and the elite being even smaller, the communists were very often the cousins of the rightists or even the brothers.

Q: How were you viewing events in South Vietnam particularly as timmoved on towards was the spring of 1975?

JOHNSON: Well, we had our own fish to fry. When it collapsed, it collapsed very suddenly. That was a surprise. A lot of people had concluded that the South Vietnamese were not going to be able to make it in the long run. Certainly in Laos we knew that what happened in Laos would largely be dependent upon what happened in Vietnam.

At the same time of course, Cambodia was going on. I remember [that] when the Khmer Rouge succeeded in mining the Mekong River so much you couldn't supply Phnom Penh, everybody concluded that Cambodia was gone. South Vietnam went. I think the result was, Laos would have just rocked along, but when the rightists saw that we weren't really going to come back and rescue these people. Given our record in Southeast Asia and the people that we backed there, they thought in their heart of hearts until the very end that somehow or other the United States would come back and take care of things and that we really wouldn't let them collapse. That we would not have spent all that blood and treasure for nothing.

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I guess it was the 17th of April that Phnom Penh fell and the 30th of April, Saigon fell. As for the smarter rightists in Vientiane across the river, they were gone. They realized that they were on their own. The communists of course realized the same thing, so they started moving some units towards Vientiane and the prime minister, who was a neutralist, ordered the rightist army not to interfere with this movement, and everybody realized then that it was all over. I shouldn't say everybody, but most of the rightist leadership at the time realized that it was all over and left. In Vientiane, unlike Phnom Penh or Saigon, since we already had the communists in town, the takeover was more subtle. I guess there was a demonstration May 1st, and another on May 9th, including a march on the American embassy. The marchers shook the gate of the embassy, and it sprang open. It had been badly made. They all jumped back when that happened, and a little unarmed kind of guard that we had there closed it again. So the demonstrators then shook their fists and threw some stones and the embassy had no windows. I don't know if you have ever seen the building. It is an old house, very unprepossessing place. There had been various coups and fights in Vientiane over the years so it was a little bit of a fort in a sense. But anyway, they threw rocks at the embassy. But they didn't try to...I was standing out there with them, kind of observing and joking with a few of them. It was a very Lao kind of demonstration.

The Prime Minister was Souvanna Phouma, who was a neutralist and whom we had either been friends with or enemies with over the years. At the time of 1975 we had pretty good relations with Souvanna Phouma and saw a lot of him. In any case, he had a rather realistic view of where power was at the time and decided not to really resist the Lao communists.

In any case, the rightists fled. The Lao communists were so mysterious that we didn't know what the name of the party was. There were arguments in the embassy at the time whether they were the Lao Revolutionary Party or the Lao People's Party. It turned out that they were the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and we didn't really know who was in the politburo. Our knowledge of the Lao communist structure was much less than it was in

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Vietnam, even the secret Viet Cong structure. We knew a lot more about them than we did about who was what in the Lao communist structure.

Neither did the Lao people. The people in Vientiane had never heard of most of them and the people in the kind of non-communist zones, had never heard of most of the leadership, and didn't know they were communists. The proclaimed goals of the Lao patriotic front probably would have passed muster at a rotary meeting. A lot of Lao in the towns along the Mekong believed that this was in fact a program. But in any case, they didn't move their soldiers into Vientiane. But the soldiers who were there moved out and demobilized the rightist army. This was May, 1975.

On May 22, 1975, a mob, run by the Lao communists—took over a large compound of ours that contained the military attach#’s office, the defense attach#’s office, the USAID building and the commissary and the American Club. The CIA, knowing that trouble was coming, had apparently taken a lot of their technical equipment and centered it in some of the buildings inside this compound. Anyway the compound was taken over, and we weren't able to get in.

There were two Marine guards in the compound, one in the defense attach# building and one in the USAID building. These two buildings didn't have any windows, so they shut themselves up into these buildings. I should say that Mr. Whitehouse, the ambassador, had left in April. He had been transferred to be ambassador to Bangkok. So Christian Chapman was the charg# d'affaires. So we had a problem. All of this was going on, and we were trying to get people out.

Kilometer 6, a housing area six kilometers outside of Vientiane where most of the USAID people had been kind of besieged. It was obvious that the function of a lot of these people no longer existed, and people who were in various provincial studies were having a hard time. We were getting them out, so we had the problem of getting back into this compound and getting the classified stuff out and getting the Marines out.

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One problem with the government was that the shell of coalition government continued to exist. The communists hadn't taken over formally. You saw the same fellow that you had seen before in the foreign ministry, but he had no authority. It was very hard to get hold of a communist in the structure, and a little hard to know how much authority they had. So it was a difficult time to try to get anything done.

There was a communist representative in Vientiane all during the war. This was one of the peculiarities of this war in Laos that there was always a representative of the other side. In the coalition government, I think his job was minister of the economy, so we went, Mr. Chapman, myself, and Larry Daks, who was the USIA fellow, since he was kind of the highest communist we could get our hands on, to try to make a deal about getting back in the compound. [His name was Sot Phetrasi]

We found ourselves negotiating with a revolutionary group, a kind of group of students or young fellows. It was the theory of the Lao communists that everything that USAID had brought into the country now belonged to the Lao people, and to them, in other words. They acknowledged, they had diplomatic relations with the United States. They didn't contest our rights under the various diplomatic conventions, but everything that had belonged to the USAID was now theirs. I don't know what the lawyers back in Washington talked about, but the view in Vientiane was "Let them have it!" We weren't going to get it out anyway.

So we basically had to get an agreement [to] get back in the compound, get out the classified stuff that we really needed to get out and then concede the rest of it to them. We had a negotiation about this and just what was the USAID's and what wasn't came up all the time. We wrestled about this in negotiations that started at nine in the morning and went to eleven at night. We negotiated an agreement in French, English, and Lao, three copies. The kind of chief negotiator for the Lao revolutionary group was a fellow who would have made a good right wing American.

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But it was a very hard negotiation, and well, the language made it difficult. But particularly Larry Daks with really great facility with Lao was a help. I noticed he was editing what Chapman was saying because Chapman had the tendency to give kind of cursive answers to some of the things, and he would kind of simplify them down. So we arrived at an agreement which allowed us one week or two weeks of access to the compound. But whatever came out of the compound had to pass under the eye of the “revolution” or whatever you want to call them.

I guess it took a couple more days to get back into the compound, but we were able to get out what we had to get out. One of the things we didn't prepare for... Well, this fellow who was so revolutionary who was in charge, kind of the chief negotiator, turned out to be interested in the personal profit. So we basically bribed him to get out whatever we really needed to get out, including the central papers of USAID and the defense attache's office. I guess the CIA got out whatever it had to get out. We kissed the commissary goodbye.

At the same time, we continued to draw down and by that time we were probably down to about 30 people.

Q: I was going to say, I assume at some point the families had left.

JOHNSON: This was going on all the time. A lot of people lost most of their possessions, and the cars were left behind and distributed by the Lao communists to other more friendly embassies or to various government entities. I am told that out in Kilometer 6 there is a well where all of... Apparently, a lot of the people that lived out there had a lot of weapons in the American way and these were all tossed in the well. I should mention that Kilometer 6, after all this was over, became the housing area as I understand for the central committee of the Lao Communist Party. But at any case, out there someplace is a well full of weapons.

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All this was going on. It was chaos. All this stuff going on at the same time. The Lao communists hadn't really asserted themselves in a law and order kind of way, so there was quite a bit of robbery and just general lawlessness going on in Vientiane. It had always been a rather calm place in between the coups, but this made it kind of a dangerous place to live.

Q: What was the spirit in the embassy at that time under ChriChapman? Were you concerned about your safety?

JOHNSON: As it turned out, no one was badly hurt, but yes, we were concerned about our safety. Our brethren in Saigon and Phnom Penh did all... Our major activity became kind of just to be. In a sense, it wasn't so much reporting or anything else. It was just to kind of preserve ourselves and preserve the embassy. At the same time other bits of property were taken over. There was an area called "Silver City," which was staff housing and also the GSO warehouse and motor pool; that was taken over one night.

I must say they always seemed to do these things on the weekend about three a.m., and since I was one of the few Lao speakers around, and the only one in the political section, I was turned out to confront them. I would get to go there with whatever was going on. There would usually be some kind of Lao communist soldiers who had, as far as I could tell, a "one size fits all" uniform which seemed to be made for somebody who was about six foot three. They were always in this ludicrous kind of uniform.

I would try to explain about diplomatic rights and the Geneva Convention, and they would just poke their guns at me. So then I would go and wait at the foreign ministry until somebody would appear. But it was hard. We had friends at the foreign ministry, people who had been there before, but they could see that dealing with the Americans was bad for their health. So they didn't want to see you, and they couldn't do much. You had to kind of trap them in order to make your complaint.

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There was the kind of special assistant to the minister who has been a deputy foreign minister now for many years, who was a Lao communist, was the fellow to see. He was the one who could connect with what was going on; if you could make a deal with him you could get something done. I should say at the same time all this was going on - people were being shipped off to "seminar." They called it "semina." That became the Lao word. "Seminar" meant anything from maybe a three hour session about the joys of the new system to the rest of your life cutting trees in a malarial jungle.

So non-communist Lao - at least the wiser ones among them - were scared, and for very good reason. Some were fleeing; some tried to flee and didn't make it; and others would try to make a go of the system. But they had every reason to be afraid of dealing with Americans, so great pressure was being put on them. It was very hard to get things done in this situation, but we kept plugging away.

Q: Well, your job was what? You were the political section?

JOHNSON: Yes. I should say that sometime in July, Mr. Chapman was replaced by Tom Corcoran as the charg# d'affaires, Tom Corcoran having served in every post in Indochina.

Q: He had actually been the last man out of Hanoi.

JOHNSON: Yes, the last man out of Hanoi. He had served in Hue, anPhnom Penh and Saigon and Vientiane. He had served there in the 1950s.

Q: Were you sort of asking yourself what were you doing? After all, Cambodia and South Vietnam had gone down the tubes. Here was this little land-locked country. What was the point?

JOHNSON: Yes. We asked ourselves that. Given the difficulties of our situation, I think, I am pretty sure if there had just been a vote of the embassy we would have closed up. But the Department of State decided that we should tough it out, and so we did. I

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must say, I guess it was July or August, Phil Habib, who was the assistant secretary for East Asia came and kind of looked the situation over. He had a meeting with Prince Souphanouvong and that was the only time in my career, by the way, that I did both memos of conversation, because they had a meeting in which they basically whispered to each other in French, and I was taking notes and everything.

When I got back to the embassy, the Prime Minister's special assistant called up to say she hadn't been able to follow the conversation and could I give them my memo of conversation. So I spruced it up and made our points even more pointedly than they had been otherwise and got to do both sides.

The foreign minister was a communist, and Habib met with him as well. That kind of settled things down, but Habib basically told us to tough it out. And we did.

Q: Were the Pathet Lao very disciplined?

JOHNSON: In retrospect, I guess I'd have to say, "Yes." They didn't shoot any of us. All this was going on and kind of normal life was going on at the same time. There were some people out water skiing on the Mekong - that sounds absurd - kind of a mixed Australian-American group. Some Lao communist soldiers decided this was the feared invasion from Thailand and opened up on them with an AK-47. Somehow or other they managed to sieve the boat, and only one fellow, an Australian as it turned out, was hit in the knee. Since it was the weekend, the Australian ambassador wasn't interested in actually doing anything, so we arranged to get him evacuated. But you had those kinds of incidents.

But for the most part, of course, we didn't know that nothing too bad was going to happen. One American private person who was there was shot and subsequently died. But that was had to do with the degeneration of the situation but didn't have to do with the communists doing it. They were putting pressure on us. They were taking away property. They did shoot at two fellows.

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Well, we heard a rumor there was going to be a march on the embassy to attack it. So the air attaché, Captain [Donald E.] Loranger, and our administrative officer, Bob McCallam, came to the embassy early to see what was going on. Nothing was going on, as often happened in Laos. So for some reason or other, they decided to go out to Kilometer Nine where there was a USAID warehouse which several weeks before had been taken over by the communists. When they got out there, they decided that they wanted to take pictures of this, so they started to take pictures of it. The guards tried to arrest them, and they got into their car and zoomed off. But they were followed and shot at by the guards. As I was going to work, I found them in a corner rather near the embassy where they were surrounded by Pathet Lao soldiers pointing guns at them.

I went over and tried to do my thing about diplomatic rights and all that kind of stuff, but they pointed their guns at me, which I thought was not an improvement in the situation. So I went to the foreign ministry and was able to get them freed after awhile. The fellow who was the defense attaché was leaving that day, and so we said, well, he'd leave, and Bob McCallam was just a simple soul who had been led astray. That was not true about Bob, but that took care of that incident. We those kinds of incidents.

Most of the Lao communist soldiers were not lowland Lao. They were hill tribesmen and relatively primitive folks. Even their Lao wasn't very good, which was another problem in dealing with them. They were kind of antsy about photographs. I got a Polaroid camera, and once I got the Polaroid camera, I could take all the pictures of them I wanted. I just had to give them one for each one that I took. That worked out pretty well. But all this was going on and, as I say, we in the embassy were... The survival of the embassy (not our personal survival, although our personal survival did come into our thoughts sometime) was the problem.

The shell of the coalition government continued, and the king was still there. In September 1975, my wife, Judy and I... I should say that in February 1975 I got married to Judith Rhodes, also a Foreign Service officer, who thus became Judith Rhodes Johnson.

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She was assigned to the embassy as the commercial officer, the only State officer in USAID. As the draw-down took place, she effectively became economic counselor in the commercial section. In any case, Judy and I and Mr. Corcoran, the charg# d'affaires all went up to the royal capital for what turned out to be the last royal boat races.

But there was still the princes, the palace, the king, etc. You could see, and we obviously didn't know the logic of what the communists meant, that the king had to go. But some people think of Laos as being kind of sui generis, and perhaps he wasn't going to go. But you could see at the September boat races the disrespect he was getting from some elements.

There were some Lao communist boats in the boat races, and there was a very close finish in which the judgement went against the Lao communist boat. There was really a great hue and cry and carrying on which wouldn't have happened in the old days. But it was a peculiar situation there.

Q: Could people get out? Could you get across the river?

JOHNSON: There was not any law anymore in a sense. Some Lao could get out legally. Most of them couldn't. People were fleeing across the river. At the same time, the CIA had organized to get out various of their contacts and [related] people out. We were doing what we could to get out various people who had worked for the American embassy or USAID.

One of the peculiarities of it was that Bob McCallam, our administrative officer - a very talented administrative officer - had been a vice consul or consul in Bien Hoa in Vietnam. He had a whole bunch of calling cards with his name and title in English on one side and then in Vietnamese on the other, and he gave these to people who were fleeing who were for one reason or another - usually because they were embassy employees or were well and favorably known to the embassy. We wanted to get consideration at the consulate in Udorn, which was about 25-30 miles from the river.

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It was soon recognized by the Thai border authorities that if you had one of these cards, the Americans would take care of you. So Bob's Vietnamese consular calling cards became international travel documents. People would then be taken to the consulate in Udorn, which became a—they were just going through an incredible amount of work. All of these people were descending on them and there were just Lao sitting on their lawn and they were working 18 hours a day. People were being flown out on C-141s, I think to Guam in the first instance, and then went back to the States. This exodus was a great burden for consulate at Udorn.

We went over and visited them one time and commiserated with them. Lee Bigelow was the consul there who had served in Laos. But it was a very dicey time. As I say, our basic problem was to kind of continue the embassy. I shouldn't say "we." Washington had decided that we should continue to be there. Laos had been the end of the road for a lot of American hippies over time. Dope and life were cheap there. A lot of these folks were under the impression that the Lao communists had the same liberal attitude towards social situations and dope that they did. Well, it turned out that the Lao communists attitude rather resembled Queen Victoria's - perhaps a little less liberal than Queen Victoria. So they scooped these people up, threw some of them in jail, and otherwise made life difficult for them. My wife and I and the charg# had a hard time about sorting them out and trying to get them out.

For a while, the Lao and the Thai were at cross purposes, so they closed the land border. The only way you could get out was a rather expensive air ticket to Bangkok. People didn't have it, and we had to negotiate a four-hour window in the middle of all this when we could take people down to the Lao kind of ferry port across the Mekong to the Thai town of Nhong Khai. In those days there was no bridge across the Mekong. There is now a bridge which was built in the last several years, but then you had to go down this whole bunch of steps and get into a small boat to go across the Mekong. The boatman always tried to renegotiate the fare about halfway across and that was kind of an adventure. But, with

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great alarms and excursions, we were able to get these hippies out. I shouldn't say [they were] all hippies, but [they were] in any case young folks. [They were] fetched up there with limited means.

We had other people, too. We had one lady who came and claimed she was a CIA agent. She was mad as a hatter, I think. If she had claimed she was a teapot, she would have been all right. The Lao communists were tremendously indulgent about insanity. But she claimed she was a CIA agent, which was a little bit off-putting. They finally arrested her. The Lao communists took a very strict view of the consular convention and allowed us to see somebody once, but then wouldn't allow us to see them again until they were released. So this lady went in for six months. I think when she finally came out, she was in great form because she basically wanted to tell her story to everybody, and these poor Lao had to take it all down. They had to interrogate her. I have always wondered about being interrogated if somebody wouldn't stop talking. So she survived that very well.

But we had a few other Americans who were in jail. There was no law, and if you were in a Lao jail it was expected that your family would feed you. These people didn't have families, but we had a whole pile of out of date army rations which we would take over. We weren't allowed to see them, but we would take these over. As I understand it, they did have to share them a bit with the guards, but they did nurture them. My wife gave away my underwear and stuff to various men that ended up in jail. Over time we got them out.

There was always a bit of a ceremony in which we would have to apologize in their name for getting them out. The lady that was involved was a particular problem because she had a little daughter that was living with an American family in Udorn, a retired American sergeant and his Thai wife. They were leaving because the air base at Udorn was being closed. The question was what to do with the daughter. I should say the lady that was in the Lao jail was Rosemary. So the baby was always referred to in telegrams as "Rosemary's baby."

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Q: That was the name of a supernatural novel.

JOHNSON: Yes. Well, as you know, the American government doesn't have the right to grab people, even babies, and send them hither and yon without their parents or without their own permission. We were able to convince the Lao to let us send Rosemary a letter kind of laying out the problem and suggesting that her baby be sent to her mother or sister who were living in the United States. But she said, "No," that she wouldn't allow this, that she had been brought up wrong, and she wanted the baby to go into a Thai orphanage.

Well, the Thai orphanages didn't take foreign babies, so we really didn't know what to do. But happily Rosemary was released before we actually had to make the decision as to what was going to be done. So she was able to take over her child. I learned subsequently that she sent the child to live with her mother in spite of it all. All of this was going on in a situation of no law.

Money was skyrocketing. The Lao kip went from about 200 to the dollar to something like 24,000. The official rate was something like 600 to the dollar, I think when it was 24,000. So if you changed your money officially, you got back a pittance. This was the only embassy I have been at in which we didn't change our money officially. That was just so absurd. I mean, the embassy obviously had to do it itself, but privately we dealt on the black market.

Q: Well, how did you get food and things of this nature?

JOHNSON: Well, it was a problem. The commissary disappeared early on after the siege of the compound. Then there was a brief - I guess we could call it - "happy period." One of the many, many, many anomalies of the situation in Laos was that all the time, all during the war, there had been a French military training mission there. A group of officers and enlisted men. There was a compound kind of between town and the airport where they lived, and they had their own commissary. They were pulling out as well, and they had to

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sell off the stuff they had. So they opened it up even to the Americans. They had really great stuff as compared to our commissary.

So we had this brief period in which we were able to go and buy up a lot of their things. I should say that one of the things that happened to my wife and me in the midst of all this was that we were evacuated for, I guess it was, 10 days when they were trying to figure out how to pull down the embassy - you know, who would stay and who would go. So we were evacuated with a bunch of other people to Udorn for about 10 days. We thought that maybe we were going forever when we left, but when we came back after 10 days, our house had been emptied. So all the kinds of things like pots and pans and sheets and pillowcases and food that we had accumulated before were gone. So we had to kind of start [anew].

We took over one of the military houses in which I guess each military person turned over their booze to whoever had stayed behind. So we had this incredible collection of liquor of one sort or another which I think was 99% still there when we left. Anyway, we just bought whatever was left in the house. So we had sheets and stuff after a while. But we were very happy when the French pulled out because they opened up their commissary.

Then after that disappeared, when the border was open, you could go to the market over in Thailand across on the ferry. But that was difficult. It was a primitive market. There were a few shops that kind of continued to exist in Vientiane and the government set up a diplomatic shop which had some of some of the necessities of life. Otherwise when we went down to Bangkok, which we would do every now and again, we would go to a market there and have them make up a whole box of meat with some dry ice and just have that as our checked baggage going back to Vientiane. But it was always kind of an adventure trying to feed yourself there.

Q: Did you have servants?

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JOHNSON: Yes, we did. They had a very hard time of it. There was great pressure on them as to why were they working for the imperialist Americans. One reason they were working for us was there weren't any other jobs, and we paid rather well. Our cook there was a lady who in a better organized world would have run a very large corporation, a very intelligent, very hard working woman. But we had her and a maid and a gardener and a guard, and we got along pretty well. But there was always this pressure, and there would be days in which they would disappear because they had to go to seminar. There was always the possibility that they would be sent off to the mountains and just disappear.

There were various local employees in the embassy who had that happen to them - who were arrested. Some of them died, and some of them reappeared months later.

Q: Well, were you able to do any political reporting?

JOHNSON: You were. You could talk to people. Of course, things were going on. Announcements were being made by the authorities which you could comment on. There were Lao who didn't really understand what the Lao communists were about, who thought that this was kind of a benevolent, agrarian reform, an honest group that was coming in and that they personally could survive in it. They didn't see any reason not to continue to have contact with Americans. It kind of put you in an awkward position because on the one hand as a political reporter I wanted to cultivate the contacts.

On the other hand, I knew that this was terribly dangerous for them. They might not know it. I mean, they didn't know it - even if I told them. It was kind of really hard decisions to make whether to maintain contacts that you had before. It was the more honest thing to do to tell them that, "no," it really wasn't wise for them. It was really difficult that way, because your instincts as a political reporter were going against, I guess, your humanity.

The shell of the coalition government continued until the beginning of December of 1975 when the communists actually proclaimed they had taken over and came out of the closet.

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The king was forced to abdicate. The Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma stepped aside, and the communists took over formally, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed. That made it easier, in a sense, because now you knew you were dealing with the real people. You didn't have to worry about a kind of scared neutralist in the ministry.

There were people who survived right on through, people who had never been identified as communists who somehow or other floated through in various ministries and other institutes or institutions. But it made the situation clearer. The king was kind of under house arrest for awhile. Then he was sent off to a house in, I guess, one of the provinces near Vietnam, and, as I understand, died there. As far as I know, the Lao have never acknowledged whether the king's death was also the crown prince's. The queen also died. The king and queen were relatively elderly people.

The crown princess, at least a few years ago, was still alive, as were other royals. The royal family was a relatively unsophisticated family in a sense. It was a large family but a lot of them didn't flee. A lot of them thought somehow or other they had a future there. Of course, one of the leading communists who became president was Prince Souphanouvong, who was a member of the cadet branch of the royal family and a half brother of Souvanna Phouma, who had been the neutralist prime minister. He was at least nominally an advisor to the government. I don't know whether they ever asked for his advice. But at least he lived on in his house and died in his bed full of years and honors. It wasn't as bad as it could have been.

I should say that as compared to what happened in Cambodia and even compared to what happened in Vietnam, the regime that the Lao communists were imposing was kind of a normal communist regime. There were certainly people who died in the work camps and the like, and there were some executions. But generally speaking, they didn't do anything that odd. They set up elaborate bureaucratic structures which, given the amount of literacy in Laos, became sinks of corruption and bureaucratic inertia. Somebody said it

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took sixteen signatures in order to be able to slaughter your own pig. They set prices so that Vientiane, which historically had always been able to get salt out of salt flats, I guess, down by the river, ceased producing salt because it didn't make sense any more. Salt was being flown in from Poland after a few months.

So it was a feckless and kind of uninspired form of communism, but it wasn't as cruel as certainly wild as the Khmer Rouge or anything like that. There were clever people who were able to survive right on through. Other people who weren't so lucky, were sent off to long term seminar or thought reform camps - some of whom died in the process, while others survived.

Q: Were there any reports of what was happening in Cambodia during the time of what became known as the "Killing Fields?" JOHNSON: Yes. Well, of course, we had some of the reporting from embassy Bangkok. Tim Carney I think was down there managing that, so there was some of that. Everything that we got directly was that the Lao, of course, had diplomatic relations with Cambodia, and so there was a Lao embassy in Phnom Penh. I talked to some folks who served in that embassy, and they basically told me that there wasn't anybody in the city. Even being communists as they were, they had a view of what normal life was like, and they had this embassy sitting in a deserted city in which they had no contact with anybody. They were fed by the foreign ministry. I think they came with a bucket of food twice a day or something, so basically they were sort of prisoners in their little embassy. So even for them, even for a good Lao communist. It was shocking!

We weren't getting anything direct about the country or what was going on. We, of course, saw the reports from Bangkok, but we did get the very peculiar impression from the Lao who were down there. The Cambodian embassy in Vientiane we didn't have anything to do with; I don't think they wanted to have anything to do with us. It was there. There was a Khmer Rouge embassy.

Q: Were there any other embassies in Vientiane?

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JOHNSON: Yes. There was a pretty good collection of embassies at the time. The British were there. The French obviously. Later on, the French broke relations or the Lao broke relations with the French for awhile. They had a spitting match about something. The Germans were there. There were the Soviets and the North Koreans. The South Koreans were there. After the communists took over, they forced the South Koreans to close and I had to go with them to the airport.

I guess one of my many little jobs was escorting people to the airport. I took the South Korean to the airport to make sure that he got on his plane and didn't have any misadventure when they closed them. I had to do the same for the Israelis. The Israelis there. I got to see them off. I guess the Mongolians opened. But there was a pretty good size - a bigger diplomatic corps than you would have expected really.

Particularly, the Australians always had a policy of important relations with what they call the "near north" [i.e., Laos]. So they had a relatively large establishment there and continue to have a large establishment there.

Q: Were there diplomatic receptions and the like?

JOHNSON: Yes. Life went on. There were diplomatic receptions. There were other parties. There was some journalistic interest in Laos, and people could come up. Laos was very strict about visas. I remember that all the visits for which I was control officer never actually took place, except Mr. Habib. You know, kind of diplomatic life went on. We had the worst of it obviously. We were seen not as the great Satan but as the enemy of the Lao communists with some justice.

One of the peculiarities was that the Lao closed out USAID and ripped it out root and branch all around the country. But after a few weeks, right in the middle of all this trouble, we got a note from the Lao foreign ministry asking to negotiate a new AID agreement. I think we sent one back saying that maybe the timing was not right. But they never pushed

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us so hard that we left, and so I guess they didn't want to really break relations. On the other hand, they were very unhappy with us and wanted to push us quite a bit.

Q: This was one of the peculiar manifestations of their own Cold War.

JOHNSON: One part of my job was writing serious notes of protest about the various pieces of property and things that they took away, asking for them back. The only thing we ever got back was a fork lift truck which caused us great difficulty because no one in the embassy knew how to say "fork lift truck" in French. It was "camion grou" as it turned out, but we did get that back. We still have disputes with the Lao government over some of the property. Most of the property was under USAID and reverted to Laos when the USAID agreement ended, so we didn't have any problem with it. But there was one area which was U.S. government, belonged to the State Department; we had bought it and are still claiming it I understand.

Q: What was the Thai attitude from your perspective towards this?

JOHNSON: Of course, the Thai had an embassy there. They had bad relations with the Lao communists. They had backed us during the war; there had been Thai units in Laos and the like. I think the Thai always have a rather condescending attitude toward the Lao like little brothers - and the Lao - whether communist or nationalist - have a real fear of being absorbed by the Thai. Laos is a country in which, if the French hadn't intervened in the 19th century, probably would have disappeared into Thailand as many Lao speaking principalities did. Thailand is such a locomotive of culture and commerce compared to Laos that it is a fear that is well founded, so there was a lot of ambivalence.

As I mentioned before, there was a several month period in which the Lao and the Thai had closed the border. There were a lot of disputes, but one of the disputes that tangled things a lot is the demarcation of the border along the Mekong and other places, but principally along the Mekong. The border treaty, and I'm not really a specialist on the border treaty, had been basically negotiated by the French with the Thai at a time when

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the French had the whip hand, and so the border favored the Lao. This, of course, didn't reflect the current strength of the two parties involved. There were quite a number of areas which were Lao but when the water was down in the dry season were effectively part of the Thai side of the river. So there were lots of little disputes there and some shooting, and as I say, border closing.

At the same time, you know, Thai business was always important. Certainly, over time, the Thai have established good relations with the new Lao authorities, but it was a difficult time for them.

Q: Vietnam is now united. Did that play much of a role?

JOHNSON: There were Vietnamese in the country. There was always some question as to how many Vietnamese soldiers were in Laos, and I don't really think we knew at the time. It didn't make too much difference. The Ho Chi Minh Trail of course had gone through Laos. In Vientiane itself, there was no Vietnamese military presence, although there was a Vietnamese embassy. There had of course been a South Vietnamese embassy as well. Yet another group that we had to see across the border.

There was a Vietnamese community. A local Vietnamese community was its own business in various towns along the Mekong including Vientiane but they were obviously important. At the time, when they started out, the Lao communist party was very obviously subservient to the Vietnamese communist party. The Lao communist party-the Lao People's Revolutionary Party to the Vietnamese Worker's Party. The people who were in charge of the Lao communist party were people who had kind of learned their communism at Ho Chi Minh's knee, and had a lot of connections with Vietnam. Some of them had Vietnamese wives. This situation has changed over time, but during those days, 1975-76, they were very much subservient to Hanoi.

Q: China?

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JOHNSON: Well, China was their-formally, their friend and ally. But you could see ambivalence about that relationship reflecting the ambivalence and changes in the Chinese-Vietnamese relationship. The Vietnamese had a great fear of China, and a great desire to be independent of China. My impression with Lao was that the Lao were much more concerned about Thailand and Vietnam; they saw the Chinese as objectively their ally against these other powers.

But during that time, given their subservience to Hanoi, they reflected the difficulties in the relationship. At that time at least they were correct. The Chinese didn't have any problems.

Q: Any Soviet presence there?

JOHNSON: Yes. There was a Soviet embassy. That was one of the peculiarities about Vientiane. Everybody was always represented there as opposed to Saigon or Phnom Penh. So there was a large Soviet embassy, and it was always hard to know what they were doing. Later on there was a large Soviet aid program and the like. But they were around.

There was an incident in which somebody threw a couple of grenades into the front yard of their embassy where they had a tennis court. These blew some holes into a couple of Soviet diplomats-not fatal as it turned out, and it was blamed on the Thai. Everything was always blamed on the Thai. But the Soviets were there. We saw them a lot, and they drank a lot was my impression. They weren't too useful as diplomatic contacts.

There was the French library downtown which had been kind of a French cultural library where you could buy books. It was like a bookstore. It became a Soviet bookstore. The Soviets put out some really great picture books, but it was really hard to buy them. Most of them were just there to be seen, but they were there and there were still businessmen there.

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I remember Shell was the major supplier of petroleum products to Laos. Although during the time of the closing of the border there wasn't any gasoline for a while that was imported legally which was awkward for the embassy. Bob McCallam, our administrative officer, basically put out the word that we were willing to pay. I think that basically we got the gasoline that was in the tanks of the armored brigade of the Lao communist army. If they had actually been asked to fire up their vehicles, they would have been in trouble. But you could go down on the main street of Vientiane, which was kind of a very quiet street, and if you announced in a loud carrying voice that you were interested in buying gasoline, gasoline would be produced. The embassy at the end of this three months had more gasoline than when we started out.

But we did have to hire a samlor, one of those three wheeled peddlthings, in order to send invitations around town and do other things.

Q: So should we quit at this point. So we will pick it up nexttime. I don't know if there is anything more to talk about in Laos.

JOHNSON: I think maybe we have plunged the depths of Laos.

Q: So you left in what, 1976?

JOHNSON: We left in July 14-Bastille Day, of 1976.

Q: And whither?

JOHNSON: We were assigned to the Department of State.

Q: Okay. We will pick it up then.

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Today is the 31st of January 1997. Steve, it is after Bastille Day, 1976. You are back in Washington. What job?

JOHNSON: Well, this was the time that you may remember of GLOP. Which was the idea of Mr. Kissinger, I guess, who was Secretary of State. The idea was that you would be sent to something you'd never done before. So I had spent a lot of time, as you can see, in the East Asia Bureau, so I was sent to the economic bureau to the food policy office where I was in a little part that dealt with food assistance. Basically PL-480, Title I and Title IV and Title II.

Q: You were in that office from when to when?

JOHNSON: I guess it would have been from about September 1976 to two years until 1978.

Q: During this 1976-78 period, where were our concentrations dealing with food?

JOHNSON: Well, what I dealt with mostly was Public Law 480, Title I and that had to do with a form of assistance where we sold certain items of food: corn, wheat, tobacco as well, and others to countries which then paid us back in local currency, I guess paid us back in hard currency but over a very long time. I think Egypt was the largest recipient at the time. There were some African countries.

There were provisions in the law that required a certain percentage, I forget now, had to go to countries below the poverty line, which changed every year. There were other provisions about how much you could give to one, and it was a relatively complicated law which I was kind of introduced to.

I guess the Department of State, in a general way, saw this aid program as a foreign policy tool, a way to assist friends of the United States. While the USAID saw it in a general way as a developmental tool. In most cases, there wasn't much conflict about it. There was a great overlap. But sometimes there was, and one problem with food aid generally was that

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basically governments received this, and then sold it and used the funds that they realized from that for governmental purposes of one sort or another. The tendency was to become addicted to this.

For one thing, you raised revenue for the government and the other thing was that it kept food prices low and for most governments in the Third World and most governments anywhere, they had to worry about urban people more than they did rural people. So this kept kind of the urban people in what was usually the one main city of the country relatively happy. But it had a deleterious effect, if not conducted correctly, on agricultural production in the country. It lowered prices for local producers. So there were lots of rules and checks and programs run by AID so as to try not to have that happen. To try to use the funds which were there... There was an agreement to further agriculture in the country that was a recipient.

Q: How did your office get involved in furthering policy?

JOHNSON: The question each year was how you divided up the pie? There was so much money that could be used for the various drains and you had to kind of jigger it so that it would fit within the rules established in the law. Obviously there wasn't as much as everyone would have liked. Decisions had to be made about the size of the various slices, and so we were involved in that in the Department. It was kind of a zero sum game, in a sense. Whatever you gave to Peter, you had to take away from Paul.

There was kind of an inertia to it as well. If a country had gotten "X" amount of aid, the tendency was that it got "X" again the next year. Since the size of the pie changed, there had to be adjustments, and of course situations changed. We were involved in all that.

Then also there was this interagency group that met - I forget if it was once a month or once every two weeks - which made the decisions about the allocation of aid, and it included people from OMB, Treasury, and AID. There were a lot of people around the

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table. We represented the Department at those meetings, and more often, I did. You had to argue your case for whatever the Department decided.

We also had various hassles with the Human Rights Bureau because they, too, had the chop on these decisions. I wouldn't say quite frequently, but from time to time, there would be a conflict between the geographic bureau and the Human Rights Bureau as to whether some particular government was deserving of assistance. We always found, invariably while I was there, we were the ally of the geographic bureau and memoranda had to be written up. Sometime these even went to the President when we were in conflict with other departments of the government. I got the impression - I forget what it was - there was one of these decisions that I think President Ford must have signed off on the morning he left office. They sent it over. This is not a major matter. I got the impression it may have been his last official act before climbing in the car.

[Given] the fact that a new President had come in, the paperwork would have to be done all over again and would have set the thing back months if we hadn't gotten through at the time.

Q: You were there certainly during part of the Camp David business, weren't you? Did you find that food was used as an enticement on either side?

JOHNSON: We were already giving so much to those countries that I don't recall there being a particular increase at that time. But it was a program that a lot of people had become addicted to, and there was always the question of repayments by the other governments as to whether they were making them, which are now were required in hard currency.

Q: Because we had accumulated, particularly in India, billions of dollars. At one point, they owed us more than their year's national budget.

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JOHNSON: We [could have] bought the whole country, just about. But these required there was a very long grace period. The thing was strung out. It was almost free money but not quite free money. People were already paying back in some instances. The question as to whether they were keeping up with their debts would come up in the discussions.

Q: Can you think of any particular countries in which the issue got rather heated during this time?

JOHNSON: Well, Indonesia comes to mind. This was all such a long time ago it is a little hard to remember the fights that we had about various things. Certainly the amount that we were giving to Egypt and Israel was odd by other, say, African people, who had to worry about other African countries' amounts that we were able to deliver were relatively small. We also had the question of tobacco. Some agencies were against tobacco being part of the PL-480, but it was part of the Act, and I guess probably solidified its political support.

Q: Did anybody in your office have any concerns about tobacco?

JOHNSON: No. I think in that sense we were a little bit amoral as far as tobacco was concerned. We were the food policy office. My general view was that if countries are going to buy tobacco they might as well buy it from us. It is a little hard to reform the world.

Q: No.

JOHNSON: I didn't worry about it too much. The tobacco was a relatively high cost item. There were just a few countries that took it. The provisions of the law limited relatively severely the amount of the appropriated money that could be spent on tobacco and cotton which were the two non-food items that could be provided under PL-480.

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During the time I was there, there was developed a Title III under PL-480 which allowed countries to pay back in their own currencies again. It required a much higher level of supervision of the spending of the funds within the country that were generated by selling the wheat or the corn or whatever it was. So as to insure that this program was going, doing a great deal to try to develop agriculture in that country, the idea was not to have this as self-perpetuating.

The other kind of PL-480 which was an emergency...There is a disaster and you come in and give it to the people. That is a whole different show. This was an almost commercial program. The idea was to wean them away from it and so they didn't become dependent on it. I guess we had mixed success in that.

We also, by the way, got involved in the questions of extending agriculture department credits to countries to buy on a commercial basis various agricultural products. Somehow or other we had to pass on that. That was basically a commercial credit program.

Q: Did you get involved in the wheat to the Soviet Union?

JOHNSON: No. Well, I guess that was in what was called the "CCC" the Commodities Credit Corporation Program. I don't remember it as being a big question. The biggest questions that came up with the CCC program was whether people were paying back whatever the schedule of payments that was supposed to take place. Assuming the Soviets were paying back we would be more than happy to sell them the wheat at the time.

Q: What about the Bureau of Human Rights? Can you think of any countries that were asking for food and the Bureau of Human Rights was saying "No. They are being mean to their people?"

JOHNSON: Well, the one that sticks in my mind was Indonesia. There are obviously others. Almost any Third World country if you look at it hard enough you can discover that

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they are sinning in the human rights way. But Indonesia came up. I'm not to sure when Indonesia took [center stage], but I guess it was just a bit before this. It seems to me it was 1975.

In any case, there was some struggle going on, and so it was regarded as particularly egregious by the human rights people. They were big recipients of our food aid. It was relatively important. There were conflicts over that. I think they got tobacco, too.

Q: In 1978, you moved on to where?

JOHNSON: Judy, by the way, had spent the two years on the Vietnam/Laos/Cambodia desk so she was dealing with the old countries. We were assigned to Bucharest, Romania, me as a political officer and she as an economic officer. So we studied Romanian for six months.

Q: You were in Romania from 1978 to when?

JOHNSON: We didn't arrive in Romania until March of 1979. Werthere until June of 1982 or July of 1982.

Q: When you arrived in 1979, what was the situation in Romania?

JOHNSON: Well, we didn't realize it at the time, but it was as good as it was going to get. Obviously it was a satellite of the Soviet Union in a sense, but it was the most independent of all the European satellites of the Soviet Union. It was ruled, unlike most other communist countries at the time, which had oligarchies and politburo in most communist countries, by the late 1970s were kind of a group of people ran the country. Obviously there was one person who was most important but it was kind of a group thing. Romania was an old fashioned kind of monarchical communism.

Nicolae Ceausescu was the [leader] of the republic and secretary general of the party ran things completely with his wife who was a member of the politburo. They didn't call it the

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politburo. They called it the political executive committee. His wife, who was a member of the political executive committee and a vice premier in the government, was the second most important in the country. But it was internally a very closed society. The Ceausescu called all the shots. You never had printed in the paper addresses, say, by the prime minister. You didn't have an account in the paper about, say, the minister of agriculture going to visit "X" collective farms.

All the attention was concentrated on Ceausescu and Mrs. Ceausescu to such a degree that it was hard to know who some of the ministers were. I mean, you knew their names, but when their pictures appeared in the papers or in the television, the only people identified were the Ceausescu's and you had to kind of know that the fellow lurking in the back was the agriculture minister. Lots of basic information about the country was unavailable. It was illegal for a normal Romanian, without official permission, to deal with a foreigner. It would have been illegal for him to come and have lunch with you or talk to you on the telephone, which was very restraining.

The political atmosphere, as I say, was very close. I remember when former President Nixon visited later on in my time there, Sam Fry, who was the charg# d'affaires, was invited to an official dinner in which Ceausescu and basically the politburo were going to be present. Sam rejoiced in the idea that finally he was going to be able to actually talk to some of these politburo members. It was very hard to know anything about them except for rumors. When he got there, basically none of the other members of the politburo did anything but grunt at various times. Ceausescu completely dominated the conversation - Ceausescu and Nixon - and so he came out of it no wiser than when he went in about any of the politburo.

Q: Well, what did you do as a political officer if you couldn't talk to people and there was nobody in power except for this pair of people, the Ceausescus. What did you do?

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JOHNSON: Well, you could meet people in an official capacity. It was always very formal, but you could go and say talk to the fellow in the secretariat of the party who dealt with the United States. You could arrange a provincial tour and go and see various officials or church people. I did a lot of contacts with the various churches. There were 14 approved churches in the country. The vast majority of the people were Orthodox Christians.

There were dissidents around. It wasn't so oppressive that they didn't allow any dissidents; they were kind of the intellectual dissidents, a relatively small group in Bucharest that you'd see who for one reason or another were kind of immune to arrest. Then there were the kind of lower class dissidents, you know, the fellow from the country who usually, because of his religion, had gotten himself in trouble, and would speak out. Most of those people would get arrested, would do about six months in jail, and be allowed to leave the country. So it was a rather rough way of emigrating if you wanted to.

There was the newspaper, the television, the radio. The story in the newspaper, the story on the television, the story in the magazine, and the story on the radio would all be exactly word for word, the same. So reading the press, the first thing you did in the morning, was always pretty easy. The party paper I mean, a lot of it was froth you didn't have to bother with.

But you didn't have to read the same story in the other paper because it was word for word the same. Your problem was that it was written in the most tedious, what the French called "langue de bois," boiler-type run-on sentences, just jargon kind of stuff. It was kind of hard to stay awake sometimes reading it. Political reporting was difficult, but it could be done within the strictures that we had. There were, of course, rumors, all the time.

[For example], my Egyptian colleague would come and see me and say, "One of my colleagues fell down yesterday and broke his wrist. So we were in the emergency hospital last night at 9:30 and while we were there, 150 or so men were brought in who looked like they had been burnt and knocked about. It looked like there had been a great explosion

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or something.” There would be nothing in the paper about this, but then maybe you would hear that there was an explosion at some factory or some disaster but which might or not be... Sometimes you would hear nothing more. That would be it. It was just this mysterious event with nothing before it and nothing after it.

Q: This is the end of the Carter administration. Let's talk a bit about that. I can think of two major things that happened by the time you arrived in Bucharest. One was the hostage crisis in Iran. The other was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Did these have any influence or anything on you?

JOHNSON: Not too much. The reason that we were interested in Romania perhaps a bit more than the other satellite, each of the Eastern European countries as we called them then had its own character and it was always bad and incorrect to lump them all together. There was a certain interest in Hungary, a certain interest in East Germany obviously and perhaps even in Bulgaria.

The reason we were interested in Romania was that it of all the Eastern European countries pursued the most independent foreign policy. Its troops were not integrated into the Warsaw Pact military organization. It had diplomatic relations with Israel right through. When the Soviets went into Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Romanians refused to go along. East Germans and the Poles and others had minor contingencies but nevertheless backed the Soviets. The Romanians didn't and mobilized their army facing the Soviet world. President Ceausescu had played a useful role in our first contact with China and in other diplomatic areas.

By the time I got there that role was less useful to us. We were basically making those contacts directly for the most part. But the interest lingered on. Ceausescu took foreign policy very seriously, and he had a good foreign ministry. They tried to play as big a role as they could and tried to act as important as they could; they had lots of visitors and the like there.

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But in the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan well, Romania criticized it. The Romanians, the most consistent aspect of their foreign policy was that they were always against any country invading another country. Obviously what they had to worry about most, under almost any pretext. Obviously the Soviet pretext about going into Afghanistan was pretty thin as it was. They were unequivocally against it. In the case of Iran, they had pretty good relations with Iran, and sold it agricultural products. There had [also] been some oil cooperation. But they had excellent relations with the Shah. I think the Shah and Ceausescu had been [allies], and my impression was that they were a little bit mystified by the new authorities there. But nevertheless tried to get along. I think they were generally sympathetic to our plight in the embassy in Tehran, but it didn't really amount to much more than that.

Q: Did you get involved in human rights dissidents and that sort of thing?

JOHNSON: Yes, we did. I should say, one of the results of Ceausescu's, I don't know if it was his policy, but at least of his practice of having the kind of "non-intellectual," the "non-famous" dissidents basically do about six months of jail time and then to allow them to emigrate that after a while there was a significant number of ex-Romanian dissidents in the United States who were related to people in Romania. After a while, whenever a dissident was beat up or somehow or another incident took place up in Transylvania, they would be on the telephone to their cousin who was now living in Cleveland, Ohio, who was then on the telephone to their congressman, who was then on the telephone to the Department of State, who then sent a rocket out to Embassy Bucharest to have a look into it.

So we were involved in those kind of cases trying to do what we could for people- a job owning the government. There were some particular cases of priests... [There was the case of] one priest I remember, Father Coucher, who was in jail all the time I was there - in which we would make representations every now and again to the foreign ministry, you know, for our desire to see him freed. One of my colleagues went to see Mrs. Cuchue. The American diplomat was a lady and was detained for 45 minutes or an hour by the police

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authorities. This was regarded as great provocation. She had the kind of human rights portfolio and so after a while some of the dissidents would cut out the middle man and call her directly from the States when they were informed of this. So the ambassador was actually called in by the foreign minister to complain about the tenor of these conversations of which they said they had the tapes. She wasn't furthering a Romanian-American relations. Well, we did what we could for dissidents. It was basically an oppressive state, which I should say, didn't allow dissidents. Obviously, it allowed a little bit. But it wasn't going to change its character fundamentally. We could only kind of nibble away on the margins. We tried our best to do that.

The country was very poor, and the economy was ill-run. They had a lot of these big, kind of dinosaur industrial projects that produced goods at a tremendous number of man hours compared to the West and polluted everything around. Just a very poor country. You kind of wondered why the people took it, the political oppression and the economic stagnation. But they did all the time I was there. Obviously in 1989 that changed.

All the time I was there we really thought you couldn't change things fundamentally until the Soviet Union made plain that it wouldn't back up authority, that it would allow change to take place, and that is what happened in the end. The Ceausescus were kind of strange in a way because, of all the communist countries of the world, I think, they did the most for, I shouldn't say, women at the lower levels, but women in positions of authority.

Because of Mrs. Ceausescu's influence, there were several women in the politburo which didn't happen in any other communist country. The ministers, there were women province governors - they were called "judets," and many more women than I would say is the case in the Vietnamese communist party that I followed before and certainly the Soviets in other places. But there was this odd bit of progressiveness about the regime which was kind of strange, given all of its other troglodyte tendencies.

Q: What about congressional relations during this time?

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JOHNSON: We had congressional visits, and we always thought that the Congressman's motto was: "Let's spend the weekend in Bucharest," because they always seemed to be there during the weekend between the Venice-NATO parliamentarians and the Paris Air Show. We had some serious groups as well. There were a considerable amount of congressional visits. The Romanians were always very professional at taking care of them. Every congressional visitor saw President Ceausescu whether he wanted to or not.

We had one group that obviously just wanted a quiet weekend, and we said, "They really don't want to bother the President." The Romanians said that if they don't see the President, then everybody will think that that is a political statement, so they have to see the President. So they dutifully did. With Congress, obviously, there were individual human rights questions that came up.

The biggest question usually was over the treatment of the Hungarian minority. Congressman Lantos, who actually is a Hungarian in Congress, was always active. The Romanians would always complain about that. I would tell them that Romanian-American [involvement] there might be a counter tide but it never was. Questions of their treatment of the Hungarian minority came up a lot with congressional interest.

There was also the question of renewing the most favored nation trade status which the Romanians had. Some of the Congressmen grumbled each time. At least during the time I was there, it was always renewed. I think two-way trade was about a billion dollars, which was a relatively significant sum at that time, and we were trying to get a contract having to do with steam turbines at the Canadian-built nuclear power station, which was going to be a very big contract. I think General Electric finally did win it. My wife was very heavily involved in that process.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

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JOHNSON: Well, when I first got there it was Rudolph Agree, who was a career officer who had started at USIA and had been previous ambassador to Senegal. Then after the Reagan administration came in, our ambassador was David Thunderburke who had been in Romania as a student. I don't think a Fulbrighter but as a student - and had a little bit of Romanian. He was a backer of Senator Helms of North Carolina, and when President Reagan won the presidency, I think Senator Helms wanted a lot of his associates given positions and the one that I know who did get a position was Mr. Thunderburke in Bucharest.

Q: He was a rather controversial figure. What was your impressioof him as ambassador?

JOHNSON: Well, it is difficult to say. We were there, I think, around one year with him. I always got the impression that he was very suspicious of the Foreign Service. But during the time, that I was there he had no ideas of his own. He didn't have a different analysis of what we should be doing. He saw every telegram that went out of the embassy, certainly all from my political section and even all the administrative telegrams and signed off on them. During my time there, he never changed a comma in any of the reporting we did. He didn't contribute very much to [reporting] and he never wrote anything himself.

When he was called in by the foreign ministry or had perhaps a chance encounter with somebody at an event, he certainly didn't try to keep secret from you what had happened. But it didn't seem to occur to him that he should write it up or perhaps bring you in and dictate it to you and have you write it up. You would have to go in and see him and say, "Well you saw the prime minister and what did he have to say?" He was perfectly willing to tell you what he had to say. Then you wrote it up and sent it in. He didn't have any much policy impact.

Q: Steve, Thunderburke later wrote a book that was very critical othe embassy...

JOHNSON: "Pins, Stripes and Reds."

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Q: He later ran for Congress. But from what you are saying, at least for the first year, he wasn't particularly engaged.

JOHNSON: I think that he was; he didn't know what to do really. Being an ambassador was obviously a completely new thing for him. He did fire several local employees who had apparently not shown proper respect for him years before when he was a student, one of them unfortunately a telephone operator and one of the only people who could get through the difficulties of the Romanian telephone system.

He just was suspicious. He kept firing his secretary because I think he saw that he really wasn't doing anything. He was reading. He kept busy, I guess, reading the political telegrams and all the paperwork that the administrative section produces and those kind of things. He did go to Baptist churches. He was a Baptist. That was kind of different for an American ambassador.

I might say about the Baptists in Romania that the Romanian idea of a church was that there was a chief, and then a kind of descending hierarchy, like a government hierarchy. You gave orders to that chief whose election you had approved. Then that went down to the lower ranks. Well, that of course is not how the Baptists are organized anywhere. There weren't theological problems, but there was just the fact that Baptists don't operate that way. They just kind of open their own churches. Pastor So and So was having a problem with Pastor So and So and they would split and start giving orders to the top man.

That didn't work with the Baptists. I don't think the Baptists really wanted to be the kind of leading dissidents. They were almost propelled into that role. So the ambassador's relationship with some of the Baptist churches was significant and helpful to them in showing American interest in freedom of religion. He did that, but otherwise he just didn't know what an ambassador did.

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My successor as head of the political section had a different idea about Romania. The kind of conventional wisdom that I subscribed to put Ceausescu really, more or less, independent of Moscow. Obviously there were limits to what he could do, but his continuing relations with Israel, his stance on the Czechoslovakian and Afghanistan invasions and all those things was real. That is what he was doing. My successor took the view that this was all a complete sham, that whatever was done was at the behest of Moscow, that Ceausescu was just a puppet in Moscow's hands.

So the analysis changed. I think that Ambassador Thunderburke found that a much more congenial kind of analysis because I guess that meant that whatever interest we did have in Romania for putting up with some of the grosser human rights violations of the Romanians didn't have any basis. So that kind of changed it. I wasn't involved in Romanian affairs anymore when this was going on, but it did then bring him more into conflict with the Department than during my time when he never sent in anything, and therefore I assume the Department [previously] found him rather congenial.

Q: What Romania at that time being used as a place for Israeldissidents - Israeli Soviet Jews - to come through?

JOHNSON: They didn't do that. They went to Vienna for the most part. The Jewish question was very big, and that was one reason why we had so many congressional visitors. The Romanians - well, these are kind of crude numbers - but as I understand it, Romania had gone into the Second World War with abbot 800,000 Jewish people. At the end of the war, there were about 400,000. The Romanians congratulated themselves on preserving as large a number as were able to survive the war. There are some questions about the various things that happened, but part of Romania, as you may remember, under the Dictate of Vienna was hived off to Hungary in the war.

Generally speaking the Jewish people in that part of the country didn't survive as well as in the Romanian part of the country. The Jewish population had dwindled after the

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war. People had been allowed to emigrate. They were the one group that could emigrate. This apparently was partly motivated by payments that the Israeli government paid to the Romanian government. So the question of how many Jews left every year was always an important one. We had to do reports on that.

When I was there, the [Jewish] population had dwindled to about 30,000 and become very elderly. The community was really kind of drying up. There was only, I think, one full-time rabbi, the chief rabbi Moses Rosen. But on the other hand, because of assistance mostly from American Jews, if you were an old person in Romania it was best to be a Jew. There were nursing homes and old folks homes that were maintained by the Jewish community that, grim as they were, were leaps ahead of anything you were likely to get from the Romanian state.

There was evidence of anti-Semitism within the Romanian establishment, but on an official level they went out of their way to be correct about the Jewish people. That was one reason why the Congress would put pressure on them but never really cut them off or eliminate the most favored nation trading status. They were doing just enough in terms of Jewish emigration to keep Congress sweet. But we had major contact all the time.

The DCM was the lead fellow usually on the Jewish question. Moses Rosen, the chief rabbi, and other leaders of the Jewish community there were people that he knew very well. That was one of the problems. When we had congressional delegations managed to get there one weekend. [They found] that the rabbi during the Sabbath couldn't drive or be driven. He had to walk. You had to kind of factor that in if you were doing any event. Mr. Rosen had to get there on foot.

The Jews had been very important in rural areas up in northeast Moldova. There were villages that you could visit up there that had been historically Jewish, with synagogues and other Jewish establishments. That was all disappearing when I was there because of emigration. I don't know what the population is now, but it looked to me at the time that

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another 10 years, there would be some people left in the old folk's homes but that would be about it.

Q: Were some of the nastier manifestations of the Ceausescu regime showing up while you were there? I am thinking of making families have lots of babies; also brutality of the secret police and things like that.

JOHNSON: The secret police certainly were brutal. The pro-natalist policy hadn't gotten as bad as it was later on when I think it went so far as to give women pregnancy checks every month. If you showed up positive but then later on didn't have a baby you had to explain. Obviously abortion was very important there. But they had a very strong pro-natalist policy which was having no effect on the [population]. It was so hard to be a Romanian woman - to have a job and to have to stand in the lines to get provisions to maintain yourself - that the Romanians were just not willing to have more children than two or less than two. So the government's huffing and puffing wasn't having much effect during the time I was there.

But the police were quite brutal. We had dissidents who came to the embassy and would leave and get beaten up by the police on the outside. Usually, if we anticipated that, we would try to get some sort of agreement from the police who were there that they wouldn't do that. Of course, when a fellow got home, things could happen to him. If we really had a great interest in somebody, they usually wouldn't beat him up. That was kind of a more casual thing. But bad things would happen to him - his job and his problems if he had made himself a pest to the authorities.

Q: *What sort of social life did you have?*

JOHNSON: Well, it was mostly sort of intra-diplomatic corps social life. There were lots of national days and dinners and things. I used to say when I was there that one of the big differences between living in Bucharest and living in Washington at that time at least, in Washington everybody always talked about real estate. In Bucharest we always talked

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about food, because even in our very privileged situation, organizing yourself to get food on the table was very difficult. When you went to somebody's house and they had chicken, for instance, you would always question them as to where it came from and what arrangements they had made. Some cousin lived on a farm someplace and they had done this and that or whatever it was. It was always a subject of conversation.

We had intra-diplomatic corps things. We had events to which Romanians came. The ambassador would have them. We ourselves had dinners and things where we would invite official Romanians, foreign ministry, and the like, that we would have contact with. You always had to do that well in advance because they would have to get permission. So it was very formal. You just couldn't say, "Come over and let's have dinner."

One of the problems with the whole system was that whenever you did run into somebody, say on a train or any kind of informal situation, who wanted to chat and was quite free and easy you always had in back of your mind or perhaps in the front of your mind, is this person a secret police spy because otherwise why is this person being so friendly and open with me? So even when they weren't present, the government kind of put this barrier of suspicion between you and anybody you contacted because a normal Romanian thinking about his self-interest, after determining who it was he was encountering, should have left you alone because that was the rational thing for him to do. If they persisted, they were obviously brave or naive or a secret police spy of some sort. There was always this kind of pressure on you worrying about what is really going on here if you did encounter someone in an informal setting.

Q: You mentioned food as being such a problem when actually isn't Romania one of the most fertile areas of Europe, isn't it?

JOHNSON: It is. They produce a lot of food, which they export because it is a big foreign currency earner for them. One of the many little ironies of the Cold War was that the U.S. army in Europe bought mainly pork in Romania. There were two, I guess, enlisted

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veterinary technicians - those who were out in two different provincial towns who were inspectors of this pork and ham and stuff that they bought. It was kind of strange because we, the embassy, were never able to get into that. We would basically have to get from the consulate commissary in Frankfurt the same ham that was produced 50 miles outside of town. That was going on all the time.

It was not all beer and skittles being one of these veterinary technicians because the Romanian slaughterhouses apparently left a lot to [desire]. I never visited, but [they] apparently left a lot to be desired. But these were the best in the country. They would slip from whatever standard the army had established from time to time. But when that happened and our inspectors refused shipments, that was a disaster for the slaughterhouse. So threats and other means of inducements were laid on these fellows who were out there. I mean, you really were alone if you were living in one of those provincial Romanian towns at the time. It was a difficult, difficult job for them.

Q: You left there in 1982. You and your wife, too. Where did you go?

JOHNSON: We came back to the Department. I was assigned to the OES bureau-the science office. The Office of Scientific and Environmental Affairs.

Q: You were in OES from when to when?

JOHNSON: I guess it was 1982-84.

Q: What were you doing?

JOHNSON: Very little. Very little. It was an office that didn't do much as far as I could tell. Basically we were the backup and kind of liaison for the science attaches who were assigned in embassies around the world. There was a scientific report that is put out once a year that I did, I guess, about what the Department of State is doing. It is for a congressional requirement.

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There is also a scientific advisory board that met every three or four months with the assistant secretary to give advice and exchange ideas. I acted as the secretariat for this and we also organized meetings of science attaches abroad from time to time. It wasn't a very demanding office.

Q: The head of OES was Malone?

JOHNSON: Malone.

Q: He had a rather troubled time, didn't he? As I recall he had a hard time in the organization of the place. It wasn't a very happy ship, was it?

JOHNSON: That was my impression. He had crossed the Congress somewhere or other before. I forget what the problem was he had. Yes. Tom Pickering had been the OES assistant secretary before, and this was spoken of as the "golden age" by the other people in the offices there. I wasn't there when Pickering was in charge. Malone, as far as I was concerned, was a nice enough person. We got along well. But our office was not the nuclear office or the environmental office or some others that were more on the cutting edge of problems. The population office was always getting beaten around the edge, given the Mr. Reagan's administrations attitude towards population control.

Q: Essentially strong anti-abortion which made it difficult going to international meetings and all that. What was your impression during this time of the science attache program?

JOHNSON: I didn't think it worked too well. Obviously, whoever was [assigned] should be a scientist or an FSO who was interested in science but not a Ph.D. or anything. There were some posts where it was useful to have somebody who would at least have an entree into the local scientific community who could act as a liaison for other parts of the government.

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We had one in Bucharest, but I never thought it was too demanding a job. My wife, as an economic officer, while we were there was able to take over all those duties during a six month hiatus, without burdening her. It was no big deal. Generally speaking, I think it best to be in the economic section but somebody who wasn't a complete scientific illiterate could probably have the contact with the local scientific community that were necessary. I don't know what it would be like say in Paris or London or someplace like that.

One time, while Judy was the science attach# in Bucharest, as I say, as a side job to her economic officering, we had a whole group of American Nobel Prize winners that came. There was one who was a Romanian-American. That was why they had come to Romania. Romania took all these contacts kind of seriously and pulled out all the stops for them. But I remember we had a lunch with all these folks and various Romanian scientists, and we wondered what do you say? What do you talk about when you are with four Nobel Prize winners? But it turned out to be rather like the Department of State or Foreign Service lunch in which everybody talked about in this case, grants and what scientist was doing what and who was "hot" and who was not and that kind of thing. We didn't know most of the names, but it was kind of familiar ground.

I won't say you should get rid of science attach#s, but it isn't that difficult - just like the labor function in the Foreign Service. In most countries now, there is no particular reason to have somebody that is just a specialist in labor affairs. Labor affairs are a part of political affairs and a part of economic affairs, and in most cases a regular political officer can do whatever is necessary. You don't really need a specialist.

Q: Well, then in 1984?

JOHNSON: In 1984 I became the Vietnam desk officer, back to the homcountry more or less.

Q: You did it from 1984 to what?

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JOHNSON: 1986.

Q: Can you talk about relations, or lack thereof of relations during this 1984-86 period?

JOHNSON: We were now nine years after the war. There had been an abortive effort during the Carter administration, when my wife was on the Vietnam/Laos/Cambodia desk, to establish relations. That foundered depending on your point of view, on Vietnam's demand for reparations or our interest at the time in culling favor with the Chinese rather than the Vietnamese. In any case, we didn't have relations with them. Needless to say, there was a lot of interest in Vietnam. By the time I got on the desk, the Vietnamese had been in New York for some time. They had an ambassador and a mission in New York, living rather austere. Their budget didn't go very far. They were kind of the point of contact for lots of Americans. We, the Department of State didn't make use of it very much, but there were lots of private Americans who contacted them through that mechanism.

The big question when I was there (the idea of reparations had long since faded out) was the whole Prisoner of War/Missing in Action issue. This was still the Reagan administration and Mr. Reagan had made resolution of Prisoner of War/Missing in Action issue a matter of highest national priority. He never said "the" highest national priority. There was always a question in my mind of how many other things had "highest national priority," but anyway he would use those words.

The government was very active in trying to find out about missing people and also recovery of remains. We had a lot of contact with the League of Families of POW-MIA families. We worked closely with the White House and with the DIA. It was a very hot issue - and it took up a large part of my time as Vietnam desk officer.

Q: What was your personal feeling about this?

JOHNSON: Well, when I first came to the issue I hadn't paid that much attention to it. Over time, in reading all the reports and going to all the meetings, I came to the conclusion that

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it was highly unlikely that anybody was being held. It was the government's position, and may still be the government's position for all I know, that we were open minded, and that we didn't know whether there was anybody being held. There was no conclusive evidence that anybody was being held. Obviously, it is almost impossible to prove a negative, but it was extremely unlikely that anyone was being held by the Vietnamese, or the Lao for that matter, or the Cambodians. Even though I was Vietnam desk officer, I had to do it for all three of those countries.

But I think the government today spends about 100 million dollars a year on trying to resolve that issue. We were just starting to get a little bit more cooperation from the Vietnamese and the Lao at that time. While I was there we had the first excavations of crash sites and the like under agreements with them, so we were making progress at least in recovering remains.

There was a large part of the U.S. population which sincerely believed that people were being held. A slightly smaller part of the population thought that people were being held, that the United States government knew about it, that this had been kept secret - a great conspiracy, and that Mr. Kissinger had known about it all the time. This had started in 1973, I guess, when the other prisoners came home. Mr. Kissinger tends to be regarded as the "devil incarnate" by that kind of person. No activity is regarded as too base for him to be involved in.

Q: It later became a sort of a political issue of the Republican right. During this time was this more discreet rather than turning into an organized political movement?

JOHNSON: Well, there were different layers. Mr. Reagan, the President, obviously took it very seriously and harnessed the administration to do everything it could. Obviously, as far as I know, Mr. Reagan was not part of the silence within the government. Then, within the private community, the majority of the people in the League of Families, the most important group, though it is hard to say what they believed... In any case, the majority

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thought that the government was acting with good will, trying to do its best. They would prod the government to do more, but basically were pro-government.

One of the things about the League of Families was that because the way the war was fought, at least my impression from going to League meetings, was, that the people that were missing were mostly officers. In many cases, their fathers were also officers. So you had a kind of group of people who were predisposed to think well of the government, not entirely so but that was their general predisposition.

Then you had within the League of Families and outside the League of Families, people who thought that the U.S. government was being perfidious, that it really knew about prisoners of war and had left them - left people there and was working hard to cover it up. League meetings were very lively affairs, with the clash of these two basic philosophies and the nuances along side it. One of the things about the POW-MIA issue was [that] I never really heard anybody say that he disagreed with somebody else but respected their motivation and their right to say what they did. Everybody tended to accuse the other person of being a dupe or stupid or of the basest motivations. The amount of hatred that was generated at these meetings was really something, so it was an interesting area to operate in.

Most of kind of the really suspicious people I met with, well, like Ambassador Thunderburke back in Bucharest, saw the Department of State as the enemy; I am not sure why. So whenever I met them I would always say, "If the Defense Intelligence Agency tells us that someone is there, we will be galvanized into action and recommend to the President at the time whatever it seems wisest to do. But they haven't done so and therefore the question really doesn't come to the Department of State but to the Defense Intelligence Agency." There is within the Defense Intelligence Agency a large office which is larger still now and deals with this whole question, and which does the analysis of live sighting reports and other indications that come to them.

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Q: What were some of the motives from the group that felt that the government was doing- was misleading or lying to them? What were the motives according to them of the North Vietnamese for keeping American prisoners?

JOHNSON: Well, they had lots of different motives. Well, the principal one was that they were to be used as bargaining chips, that President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger had promised 3.4 billion in aid or so and these people had been held back in order to get the United States to deliver on that promise. You could always reply by saying, "What are they waiting for? When are they going to bring these people forth to bargain?" It never happened. It had never been suggested. That was the principal reason that it was alleged.

There were others like revenge. Or [that] these were people who had particular scientific or technical knowledge that was being exploited or that there were wayward warlords off in the woods that kept these people around for one reason or another. But the principal reason thing was this idea of being held back to bargain about reparations.

Q: *Did you run across during this time sort of professional con men?*

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. There were many exploiting these people. Two of my rules were that no con man, however, often exposed as the complete charlatan, never went away or was ever really disposed of. No story, however often shown to be untrue or a fabrication, ever went away. But yes, there are people who are con men who were involved in the thing, who bilked people out of a lot of money.

Well, while I was there, there was kind of a side issue. There had been an American oil drill ship, I think, doing exploration south of Hainan Island in Chinese waters. This must have been 1983. It had been overtaken by a typhoon and sank, with no survivors. But all the time I was on the desk, there were rumors that some of the people had made it to Vietnam and were being hidden. I remember one gentleman who was a lawyer in Austin, Texas whose son had been lost on the ship. I guess he was a Yugoslav, maybe now we

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would say he was a Croatian. But in those days he was a Yugoslav who passed himself off as a KGB agent to this fellow and bilked him out of tens of thousands of dollars with a scenario which had secret meetings hither and yon with always the promise that a little bit more and the son would be produced. Finally the father turned to the FBI, and the FBI stepped in, arrested him, and brought him to trial. Even then the father said that he thought the FBI had bungled it. Even though they showed he was a Yugoslav con man, he thought this fellow really did have the KGB contacts he alleged to be able if they just had gone a little bit farther that maybe the son would be produced. But the mentality was all through the issue.

Basically you could go to the Nana Hotel in Bangkok, and if you announced in a loud carrying voice in the bar that you would pay money for evidence that Joe Smith was alive, evidence would be produced. You name it and it was forth coming. Bones, or dog-tags or pictures. There were these various pictures that arose as well. But yes, there were lots of charlatans operating.

Q: When you on the desk, did you get the feeling that there might be establishing diplomatic relations then or was this something that there was no point in particularly planning for?

JOHNSON: Well, when I came to the desk I was hopeful that we would be able to establish diplomatic relations during my anticipated two years. But it was apparent that wasn't possible, early on, so I didn't worry about it too much while I was there. We certainly talked with the Vietnamese. We had lots of official contacts. I myself went with a congressional delegation to Hanoi while I was on the desk.

But given the climate of the times, it just wasn't a possibility of having relations. They would have made sense. Our embargo was going to hurt us as far as trade was concerned, though from 1984-86, Vietnam really wasn't doing that well. It was still relying a lot on Soviet aid and its economy. They had just a few years before decided they couldn't

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just continue in a monolithic command economy and were breaking out of that. But they were doing pretty badly economically at the time. But you could see the potential was there. Vietnam is a rich country with an intelligent, hardworking population. Other countries were getting interested, and of course the oil exploration was going on and the exploitation was starting at the time. But it really wasn't possible to do anything about that. You would just been wasting your powder for no reason.

Q: What was your impression both looking at it from Washington antraveling to Hanoi of the Vietnamese government during this time?

JOHNSON: Well, I am just trying to remember when all these things happened. The government at the top had become a sort of geritocracy. One of the problems with communism is that there is no retirement program. I was just trying to remember wheLe Duan died. He was the successor as much as Ho Chi Minh had a successor. But in any case when he died it didn't make that much difference. It was a rather lethargic government struggling with the contradictions between its ideology and what it saw that it had to do in an economic way.

At the lower level, it was a tremendously corrupt and feckless Third World government, made all the worse because the government had a lot more power than it did in other countries. I don't know if you could buy them, you could certainly rent lower level officials. Almost every official act required a bribe of some sort, which was understandable given their rates of pay. It wasn't doing very well at that period-1984-86 from an economic point of view and a governmental point of view.

At the time, of course, they still had thousands of former South Vietnamese government officers and officials in thought reform camps that were a problem. Although they were allowing people to emigrate and had the orderly departure program, we were trying to stop the boat people. Of course, the boat people thing was tremendously dangerous for those who went that way, both from the authorities and pirates and then from the

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weather. So the orderly departure program was going, and the Vietnamese government was cooperating - and pretty successful, I thought.

Part of that was that we had Amerasian mixed-blood children of soldiers and Vietnamese women that were coming out. So we were doing a lot of business with the government, but the country was in pretty bad shape at the time given the war and that kind of un-wisdom of the economic policies they were following.

Q: How did we look upon the integration of North and South Vietnam? How was that going?

JOHNSON: South Vietnamese communists I guess we can call them-those people in the Vietnamese communist party hierarchy who saw themselves as southerners were unhappy with how things were going. They had really been imposed upon by the north, and a lot of them had really thought that the South Vietnamese would have a more autonomous role than they were allowed. They were unhappy with how quickly the country had been jammed together and also [with] the positions they were given.

There were a lot of North Vietnamese cadres that came down and were given jobs as provincial this or post master that who generally saw southern cousins as slow and crooked and not too smart and kind of lorded over them. That obviously sat ill with a lot of the southerners. There was never a rebellion or anything like that, but there was a lot of friction even within the communist establishment, let alone of course the South Vietnamese who were part of that establishment, some of whom were hunkering down; others who were trying to get out.

Q: Were we making any representations to try to help any former South Vietnamese officials and army officers and all in these reeducation camps? I mean, many of them had been our friends and all that?

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JOHNSON: We were. We had a program which allowed them to come to the United States if they could get out of these camps and, generally speaking, they were getting out at that time. So, yes, we were helpful. We did bring it up. Obviously, we couldn't put too much pressure on Hanoi. But what pressure we could exert, we exerted.

Q: How did you find the officials you talked to from Vietnam at this time? Did they look upon the Americans as the great Satan or were they pragmatic?

JOHNSON: Oh, they were very pragmatic. I guess more so than we were. No, they saw China as the great Satan at that time. They just had that border war with the Chinese, and I think they were worried because we were friendly with China than we were to them. But no, they were always very pragmatic, and whenever they got the chance they would try to exploit the liberal guilt of Americans who would visit there and tell them about their own problems and the like. But no; they were businesslike.

Q: In Congress, did you find a strong cadre that was basically unforgiving of the "Vietnamese" ("Vietnamese" may not be the right term), that we had essentially lost the war and the Vietnamese were responsible for it and damn them to hell?

JOHNSON: Yes. I think that was the underlying attitude of quite a number of congressmen and senators at the time. I think that was one reason that the POW-MIA issue got the play that it did and the people that strongly backed the view that they were holding people came a lot from that kind of attitude that they were evil incarnate.

Q: Were we concerned at that time about Soviet use of places like Cam Ranh Bay?

JOHNSON: We were. The Soviets were in Cam Ranh Bay. They had some smaller bases around. Yes, we kept a very close eye on Cam Ranh Bay and observed the comings and goings there. The Soviets were also involved in oil exploration; they had a large kind of colony - people working in oil down at Cap San Jacques, I guess, to the old timers. The

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Vietnamese generally had a low opinion of the Soviets. They called them “Americans without money.”

When I was in Hanoi and I was walking around the [market], little boys came up and called us “Soviets.” We said, “No, we are Americans.” They became very curious. But yes, we were following what the Soviets were doing. They were still giving considerable economic and military aid. They had the base; the base was both a naval and an air base, and they did reconnaissance flights out of Cam Ranh. They obviously faced across the East China Sea or the South China Sea, the American bases at Subic Bay-Clarke Field at the time.

Q: Were we feeling any particular threat or was this sort of general Soviet expansion? What did we think they were up to?

JOHNSON: Well, there was general Soviet expansion. There was some question as to how subservient to the Soviets the Vietnamese were. During the war, the Vietnamese had always been very careful to kind of keep an equidistance between the Chinese and Moscow, between Beijing and Moscow. They really were independent. They weren't under the thumb of Moscow or under the thumb of Beijing, although I'm sure they had to take in the attitudes in those two places.

But this had eroded after troubles with the Chinese when they expelled a large part of the Chinese population of Vietnam. There were other problems. There was the Border War. They had signed a treaty with the Soviet Union, and the question was how much were they under the Soviet thumb? I think probably not that much. But the Soviets were giving them a considerable amount of aid - I think about a billion dollars a year at that time. So they obviously had to take it into account - Soviet sensibilities, and I assume the Cameron Bay place was a quid pro quo.

Q: Again, in this 1984-86 period, Vietnamese military any particular threat? Cambodia, Laos? Did you see Vietnam as an expansionistic power?

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JOHNSON: I think we were still worried about it, but they weren't much. They still had some troops in Laos, and the Laotian government at the time was still pretty subservient to Hanoi. In Cambodia, there had been the December 1978 to January 1979 war in which they basically took over Cambodia. They set up their own puppet regime. There really was some concern, I think, in Thailand particularly, but by that time I think it was ebbing - the Thai pretty much taking care of their own communist insurgency. The Vietnamese had made pretty plain they didn't really have any ambitions beyond Cambodia.

By that time, I think they would really come to realize that they had a tar baby in Cambodia. It was expensive and was causing them lots and lots of problems. That was one of the most objective of our criteria for having relations with them if they get out of Cambodia. But they didn't know how to get out of Cambodia because if they got out any regime that resulted would likely be anti-Vietnamese. So we weren't really worried about them expanding at the time.

Q: Well then, you left in 1986, and whither?

JOHNSON: To a sabbatical year at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. Judy and I were made Dean/Virginia Rusk Fellows there. I wrote a paper on evolution of things in Vietnam which was published by the FSI.

Q: I can't remember what it was called.

JOHNSON: Joe Zasloff, the authority on Laos, was the editor of it, but I did that. I also took some courses, and otherwise we enjoyed ourselves for a year.

Q: Now Judy was doing what at the time? Before the Georgetown...

JOHNSON: She for a while was the deputy head of... They had political tradecraft course at FSI. She did that for awhile. Then she became the Nigeria desk officer and did that for a year. Then she became the director of West African affairs for the West Africa Bureau.

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Q: So, from 1986-87, it was Georgetown. Then in 1987, where?

JOHNSON: What happened in 1987 was, we went through the bidding process and had a difficult time finding anything together. We finally decided that whoever got assigned first, the other one would go on leave without pay. Judy got assigned first in Nairobi. So I went on leave without pay and floated off to Nairobi for two years, where I did a lot of safaris and did some pieces of work for AID and other things.

Q: How did you find being the spouse of a Foreign Service officer? How was this?

JOHNSON: It wasn't bad. Nairobi was nice. All our relatives came and visited, and it is a wonderful, beautiful country. So I enjoyed it a lot and did enough work for AID doing various things to make a little bit of money. It was very pleasant.

Q: Well, in 1989, where?

JOHNSON: Well, in 1989 we came back to Washington. I was assigned to INR to do basically Indochina with a concentration on Cambodia.

Q: You did that from 1989 until when?

JOHNSON: Until I retired in 1993.

Q: So you really couldn't get rid of Indochina. This was your life.

JOHNSON: As it turned out.

Q: What was the situation? This is basically the Bush administration.

JOHNSON: It was Bush most of the time except for the last part when Mr. Clinton had come in. The squeakiest wheel at the time was Cambodia. When I came in there, an international conference was taking place in Paris to try to solve the Cambodia problem

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- basically to figure out a way to get the Vietnamese out somehow or otherwise to produce in Cambodia a government that would express the will of the people and was internationally acceptable. The conference didn't achieve that.

In Cambodia at the time a low level war [was going on]. It was the government of Cambodia. What did they call themselves at the time? Later on they changed their name [from Kampuchea] to the State of Cambodia. That was more or less a group [whose] leadership had come from the Khmer Rouge, from various Khmer Rouge that had fled or had other problems who were then installed by the Vietnamese. On the other side, there was a coalition of three parties. The first were the Khmer Rouge. In other words, the communist party of Cambodia, the people who had done the genocide that had taken over in 1975. The second group was the FUNCINPEC, which is an acronym which means United Front for [an Independent, Peaceful, Neutral, and Cooperative] Cambodia. It was basically the Sihanoukist party. The third party was the Khmer People's National Liberationist Front, the KPNLF, under Son Sann. I guess in a way they were the heirs of the Lon Nol regime of non-communist, non-neutralist Cambodia. They existed in Cambodia but also in camps in Thailand along the Cambodia border. There were various camps. Each of these three groups had armies. By far the most important army was the Khmer Rouge. As I say, there was a little war going on at a rather low level. We gave some assistance to the non-communist parts of the coalition. The Chinese along with other people, the Chinese supported the Khmer Rouge.

The problem was: How do you end this? A lot of people thought, well, basically the world was willing to fight to the last Cambodians. There didn't seem to be much prospect for ending the war. I guess the most important thing that happened was the Soviet Union changed [and was] no longer interested. So the Soviet Union was no longer backing the Vietnamese, which meant that the Chinese no longer saw the authorities - the government in Phnom Penh - as being a kind of Soviet [protégé] or they didn't have the same necessity

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to back the Khmer Rouge in order to prevent what they saw as Soviet expansion. So it became possible to talk.

There was a long negotiated process with lots of meetings and lots of alarms and excursions and which finally resulted, I guess, in October of 1992, in an agreement. My job in INR was following all this and trying to predict what would happen and what the wisest course of action would be.

One problem we had was that the Congress was very concerned that there be no cooperation with the Khmer Rouge and didn't want to see any assistance from the KPNLF [Son Sann] to the Khmer Rouge. In fact, all the assistance was going the other way. The Khmer Rouge was so much better funded and so much stronger than the KPNLF army that sometimes they fought each other but when they did assist each other it was the Khmer Rouge assisting the two non-communist parts of the regime.

Q: Where was the Khmer Rouge getting its money and arms?

JOHNSON: Well, it got Chinese aid, and it was able to exploit the timber in the parts of Cambodia it held for a large rural tax, as well as [diamonds and rubies] in the Pailin area near the Thai border. The assistance came through Thailand, obviously the Thai army. Nothing happened without the cooperation and assistance of the Thai army, and there were depots and ships would arrive at Thai ports, trucks would move, and they were always quite adequately supplied.

Q: Did we make any noises about this to the Chinese?

JOHNSON: Yes, without much effect. It went on all the time. Part of the agreement which in the war stipulated that there wouldn't be any more assistance to the other parties. The Chinese, as far as I could tell, pretty much lived by that. Once they signed they didn't send anymore weapons or money to the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge had lots of

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money. Basically, if you had money, you could get small arms if you wanted on the Thai-Cambodian border.

There was such a surplus of arms [there] that some of them were flowing to the Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka. So in as much as [there was] smuggling going on, it was going the other way.

Q: Was the United States State Department playing any part in what was going on? Was INR part of that or were we playing pretty much the part of an observer?

JOHNSON: No. The East Asia Bureau was very active in trying to move along the negotiating process, and INR was backing them up with analysis. Quite frequently we were so overwhelmed with writing papers and other things we became part of the desk in moving things along. Mr. Dick Solomon was the assistant secretary for East Asia, I guess at that time. He played a very large role. There were just kind of interminable meetings hither and yon. There were lots of players. But once the Chinese and the Soviets were no longer in conflict in the area, the Vietnamese agreed to withdraw and were withdrawing from Cambodia. So the Phnom Penh authorities had some reason to try to make a deal. At the same time the Chinese were able to get enough international pressure on the Khmer Rouge for them to get into the deal, and the two non-communists had no other prospects but to get in on the deal. So it was possible then to actually negotiate something.

One of the really fortunate things about the whole process was that they had seen it. One could [assume] that all Cambodians would rally around if they could agree to support... You could put pressure on all of the factions to move along. He really was interested in a settlement. So they with lots of and starts and sometimes everybody thinking that it wasn't going to happen, they were finally able to arrive at an agreement, very expensive agreement from the point of view of the United States and the United Nations requiring a large U.N. presence in Cambodia for 18 months. I said before that the agreement in

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October but it must have been earlier than that. It ended in September of 1993. The elections were in May of 1993.

But when all the parties signed the agreement, there was a cease fire, with elaborate provisions for the demobilization of the various armies and handling the weapons and for a structure in Phnom Penh. A provisional structure that would lead up to elections that were going to be run by the United Nations. But when the first Khmer Rouge representatives arrived in Phnom Penh, they were attacked. I forget the timing of all this, but they really didn't stay in Phnom Penh that long. They were there for several months, but the Khmer Rouge were unwilling to go forward with the agreement as it was signed. They weren't willing to demobilize their army, to bring them into camps, to open up their zone to the process. They gave lots of reasons why that was the case. They really had no choice that the Khmer Rouge really couldn't operate in an open political system. That was the Khmer Rouge couldn't be the Khmer Rouge and operate. So after awhile they left Phnom Penh. But the other parties continued thought all the demobilization never took place. All four of the armies continued to exist.

The United Nations did go in with a very large presence and controlled affairs, [though] obviously not as well as the agreement stipulated. But pretty well and there was an election. I went as one of the U.N. election officers. I was there for about three weeks in Nee Mouck district [in] Cambodia. You could see the Black Mountains from where we were staying in Nee Mouck town. By coincidence, I helicoptered into Nee Mouck in May of 1970 when we had a famous incursion in Cambodia and I was taking around a congressional staff at the time. I was back at the rubber plantation. I must say both of us were worse for wear. The rubber plantation looked like it had suffered more than I had. But we ran the election, and it went really well. There were some attacks by the Khmer Rouge on the election process but not very many. One friend in a neighboring district, the Khmer Rouge had mortared them after they set up their polling booths after several hours. He thought deliberately, but they didn't actually hit him. They were only about 100 yards away.

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In our district, we never were attacked, but there were some Polish soldiers who were stopped and killed up the road a little way. We didn't have any problem. We ran the voting as prescribed. People were tremendously happy to turn out and vote. One of the big problems in Cambodia had been to convince the people that the ballots would be secret. The government was putting it about that they would be able to know if you voted against them. But the U.N. had a radio that broadcast in Cambodia. [The group that ran it] was able to convince the people that they would be able to vote secretly. At least in our district the government went and plucked people in, and obviously thought they were going to vote for the Cambodians People's Party. But they voted overwhelmingly for the FUNCINPEC party.

The province governor was the brother-in-law of Norodou Ranariddh, the prime minister. This province is the biggest province in Cambodia in population so it was very important electorally. The election took place on the basis of proportional representation by province. So when we went back to the province capital to count the votes each of the parties had the right to have election observers and to watch us count. It became evident very quickly that the FUNCINPEC were going to get the majority, and the province governor threatened to attack us.

But there was a company or a battalion of Indian soldiers there, around the ruined theater where we were doing the counting, and the mob thought better of it. But there was great tension. The authorities were supremely confident that they were going to win the election. It was a great shock when FUNCINPEC got more votes and more seats than they did. There was a very brief secession on their part once they threatened not to participate any more. But they all came around in the end.

I thought in a lot of ways the election was the best possible results because the royalists didn't get a majority. They got a plurality. But the government got enough that they had to be included. Heng Samrin did. There were enough votes for what was called the Buddhist's Liberal Democratic Party so that they were included as well. So everybody

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kind of got a piece of the pie. You had to work through the structures of the Cambodian People's Party to take control of everything. So the result was this coalition, and the war pretty much stopped. Although the Khmer Rouge continued out in the woods kind of withering away. But it was rather exciting times in Cambodia.

Q: Did you see up to 1993 any particular change in Vietnam?

JOHNSON: Vietnam by that time embraced capitalism fervently. The Vietnamese were very lucky in their timing because after 1989, Soviet aid went straight down, but almost equally oil revenue was going straight up. They kind of passed each other, so the Vietnamese didn't suffer the consequences of the loss of Soviet aid that one might have expected. At the same time, they were much more rational about what they were doing in agriculture. In that four-year period, again, for the first time I guess since the Second World War, they were a rice exporter. They were exporting a significant amount of rice. They were getting oil revenue. They were attracting a lot of international investment, or at least interest in international investment. Lots of businessmen there. We were still embargoing them at the time, but they were doing quite well.

The government was feckless and corrupt, particularly at the lower levels. But that wasn't stopping most people from going forward. Another one of the anomalies was there had been a kind of triumph by the South Vietnamese that the people in the highest levels of the economy in Hanoi were basically from the South Vietnamese part of the party. Saigon had become the locomotive of the economy and was much quicker in embracing the changes in the capitalism that now had been government policy. So a lot of North Vietnamese were rather rueful about how things worked out.

Hanoi has changed some now, but at the time, Hanoi had been just been left behind by Saigon in this economic vitality. At the same time the Soviets were pretty much gone. I should say it was the Russians by this time. One of the peculiar things that shows you that bureaucracies are the same all the world over just about the time that Cam Ranh Bay

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Russian base had ceased to have any importance, and almost any Russian presence all the facilities there were finally completed. So the barracks they had been working on and the volleyball courts and the theaters and that kind of stuff finally were done just as they had no purpose to serve. I think they used it a little bit as a more. But it really is of no consequence any more.

Q: Just about that time, we basically hauled out of the Philippines.

JOHNSON: Yes, we did.

Q: Well, one last question on this, Steve. You said we still had the embargo on Vietnam. Was the State Department taking any stand on this or was this thought to be just a political thing that was the responsibility of someone else to handle?

JOHNSON: The State Department generally was in favor of relations and of ending the embargo. There was a lot of hope that particularly on the embargo relations, Mr. Bush might do this before he left office, which didn't happen. There was fear that because of Mr. Clinton's background that, not having served in the military and not having gone to Vietnam, he would be reluctant to kind of get involved in that. But yes, that was the general attitude.

Certainly the general attitude of INR was that we were shooting ourselves in the foot economically, that certainly lots of opportunities that had been passed by, and that our embargo wasn't really hurting the Vietnamese. Obviously it was an annoyance to them and they wanted it gone, but that was about it. There wasn't going to be any big concession from them. It had been helpful in the past in making them more cooperative on the POW-MIA issue. By the time I came back in 1989, the cooperation on all three of the countries on the POW-MIA thing was pretty [smooth].

The Lao were always the most difficult. The Lao, I guess because of their small size, they were most antsy about their sovereignty. By this time had kind of gone their own

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way. They were no longer under the Vietnamese thumb as they had been before. But it was hard to get cooperation not so much out of ill will as a desire not to be seen to be kowtowing to the United States. The Vietnamese were easier about that and opened their books and had a large, very early on-long before we had relations, we had a large POW-MIA office in Hanoi and helicopters flying around and digs going on-tremendous money-makers for the Vietnamese.

In Cambodia, no one really believed that anybody could have survived the Khmer Rouge period. But there was interest in finding remains and in as much within their capacity all of the non-Khmer Rouge factions in Cambodia were more than happy to cooperate. The fraud and charlatanism and all that kind of thing continued unabated. But that was an interesting period there.

Q: Well, Steve, then you retired.

JOHNSON: Yes, I retired.

End of interview